



THIS MORTAL COIL

VOL. II.

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THIS MORTAL COIL

A Novel

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

COMPLICATIONS.

ELSIE spent a full fortnight, or even more, at Lowestoft; and before she vacated her hospitable quarters in the Relfs' rooms, it was quite understood between them all that she was to follow out the simple plan of action so hastily sketched by Edie to Warren. Elsie's one desire now was to escape observation. Eyes seemed to peer at her from every corner. She wanted to fly for ever from Hugh—from that Hugh who had at last so unconsciously revealed to her the inmost depths of his own abject and self-centred nature; and she wanted to be saved the hideous necessity for explaining to others

what only the three Relfs at present knew—the way she had come to leave Whitestrand. Hungering for sympathy, as women will hunger in a great sorrow, she had opened to Edie, bit by bit, the floodgates of her grief, and told piecemeal the whole of her painful and pitiable story. In her own mind, Elsie was free from the reproach of an attempt at self-murder; and Edie and Mrs. Relf accepted in good faith the poor heart-broken girl's account of her adventure; but she could never hope that the outer world could be induced to believe in her asserted innocence. She dreaded the nods and hints and suspicions and innuendoes of our bitter society; she shrank from exposing herself to its sneers or its sympathy, each almost equally distasteful to her delicate nature. She was threatened with the pillory of a newspaper paragraph. Hugh Massinger's lie afforded her now an easy chance of escape. She accepted it willingly, without afterthought. All she wanted in her trouble was to hide her poor head where none would find it; and Edie Relf's plan enabled her to do this in the surest and safest possible manner.

Besides, she didn't wish to make Winifred unhappy. Winifred loved her cousin Hugh. She saw that now; she recognized it distinctly. She wondered she hadn't seen it plainly long before. Winifred had often been so full of Hugh; had asked so many questions, had seemed so deeply interested in all that concerned him. And Hugh had offered his heart to Winifred—be the same more or less, he had at least offered it. Why should she wish to wreck Winifred's life, as that cruel, selfish, ambitious man had wrecked her own? She couldn't tell the whole truth now without exposing Hugh. And for Winifred's sake at least she would not expose him, and blight Winifred's dream at the very moment of its first full ecstasy.

For Winifred's sake? Nay, rather for his own. For in spite of everything, she still loved him. She could never forgive him, but she still loved him. Or if she didn't love the Hugh that really was, she loved at least the memory of the Hugh that was not and that never had been. For his dear sake, she could never expose that other base creature that bore his name and wore his features.

For her own love's sake, she could never betray him. For her womanly consistency, for her sense of identity, she couldn't turn round and tell the truth about him. To acquiesce in a lie was wrong, perhaps; but to tell the truth would have been more than human.

"I wish," she cried in her agony to Edie, "I could go away at once and hide myself for ever in America or Australia or somewhere like that—where *he* would never know I was really living."

Edie stroked her smooth black hair with a gentle hand; she had views of her own already, had Edie. "It's a far cry to Loch Awe, darling," she murmured softly. "Better come with mother and me to San Remo."

"San Remo?" Elsie echoed. "Why, San Remo?"

And then Edie explained to her in brief outline that she and her mother went every winter to the Riviera, taking with them a few delicate English girls of consumptive tendency, partly to educate, but more still to escape the bitter English Christmas. They

hired a villa—the same every year—on a slope of the hills, and engaged a resident governess to accompany them. But, as chance would have it, their last governess had just gone off, in the nick of time, to get married to her faithful bank clerk at Brixton; so here was an opportunity for mutual accommodation. As Edie put the thing, Elsie might also have supposed, were she so minded, she would be doing Mrs. Relf an exceptional favour by accepting the post and accompanying them to Italy. And to say the truth, a Girton graduate who had taken high honours at Cambridge was certainly a degree or two better than anything the delicate girls of consumptive tendency could reasonably have expected to obtain at San Remo. But none the less the offer was a generous one, kindly meant; and Elsie accepted it just as it was intended. It was a fair exchange of mutual services. She must earn her own livelihood wherever she went; trouble, however deep, has always that special aggravation and that special consolation for penniless people; and in no other house could she possibly have earned it

without a reference or testimonial from her last employers. The Relfs needed no such awkward introduction. This arrangement suited both parties admirably; and poor heart-broken Elsie, in her present shattered condition of nerves, was glad enough to accept her new friends' kind hospitality at Lowestoft for the present, till she could fly with them at last, early in October, from this desecrated England and from the chance of running up against Hugh Massinger.

Her whole existence summed itself up now in the one wish to escape Hugh. He thought her dead. She hoped in her heart he might never again discover she was living.

On the very first day when she dared to venture out in a Bath-chair, muffled and veiled, and in a new black dress—lest any one perchance should happen to recognize her—she asked to be wheeled to the Lowestoft pier; and Edie, who accompanied her out on that sad first ride, walked slowly by her side in sympathetic silence. Warren Relf followed her too, but at a safe distance; he could not think of obtruding as yet a male presence upon her shame and grief; but still he could

not wholly deny himself either the modest pleasure of watching her from afar, unseen and unsuspected. Warren had hardly so much as caught a glimpse of Elsie since that night on the *Mud-Turtle*; but Elsie's gentleness and the profundity of her sorrow had touched him deeply. He began indeed to suspect he was really in love with her; and perhaps his suspicion was not entirely baseless. He knew too well, however, the depth of her distress to dream of pressing even his sympathy upon her at so inopportune a moment. If ever the right time for him came at all, it could come, he knew, only in the remote future.

At the end of the pier, Elsie halted the chair, and made the chairman wheel it as she directed, exactly opposite one of the open gaps in the barrier of woodwork that ran round it. Then she raised herself up with difficulty from her seat. She was holding something tight in her small right hand; she had drawn it that moment from the folds of her bosom. It was a packet of papers, tied carefully in a knot with some heavy object. Warren Relf, observing cautiously from

behind, felt sure in his own mind it was a heavy object by the curve it described as it wheeled through the air when Elsie threw it. For Elsie had risen now, pale and red by turns, and was flinging it out with feverish energy in a sweeping arch far, far into the water. It struck the surface with a dull thud—the heavy thud of a stone or a metallic body. In a second it had sunk like lead to the bottom, and Elsie, bursting into a silent flood of tears, had ordered the chairman to take her home again.

Warren Relf, skulking hastily down the steps behind that lead to the tidal platform under the pier, had no doubt at all in his own mind what the object was that Elsie had flung with such fiery force into the deep water; for that night on the *Mud-Turtle*, as he tried to restore the insensible girl to a passing gleam of life and consciousness, two distinct articles had fallen, one by one, in the hurry of the moment, out of her loose and dripping bosom. He was not curious, but he couldn't help observing them. The first was a bundle of water-logged letters in a hand which it was impossible for him not to

recognize. The second was a pretty little lady's watch, in gold and enamel, with a neat inscription engraved on a shield on the back, "E. C. from H. M.," in Lombardic letters. It wasn't Warren Relf's fault if he knew then who H. M. was ; and it wasn't his fault if he knew now that Elsie Challoner had formally renounced Hugh Massinger's love, by flinging his letters and presents bodily into the deep sea, where no one could ever possibly recover them.

They had burnt into her flesh, lying there in her bosom. She could carry them about next her bruised and wounded heart no longer. And now, on this very first day that she had ventured out, she buried her love and all that belonged to it in that deep where Hugh Massinger himself had sent her.

But even so, it cost her hard. They were Hugh's letters — those precious much-loved letters. She went home that morning crying bitterly, and she cried till night, like one who mourns her lost husband or her lost children. They were all she had left of Hugh and of her day-dream. Edie knew exactly what she had done, but avoided the vain

effort to comfort or console her. "Comfort—comfort scorned of devils!" Edie was woman enough to know she could do nothing. She only held her new friend's hand tight clasped in hers, and cried beside her in mute sisterly sympathy.

It was about a week later that Hugh Massinger, goaded by remorse, and unable any longer to endure the suspense of hearing nothing further, directly or indirectly, as to Elsie's fate, set out one morning in a dog-cart from Whitestrand, and drove along the coast with his own thoughts, in a blazing sunlight, as far as Aldeburgh. There, the road abruptly stops. No highway spans the ridge of beach beyond: the remainder of the distance to the Low Light at Orfordness must be accomplished on foot, along a flat bank that stretches for miles between sea and river, untrodden and trackless, one bare blank waste of sand and shingle. The ruthless sun was pouring down upon it in full force as Hugh Massinger began his solitary tramp along that uneven road at the Martello Tower, just south of Aldeburgh. The more usual course is to sail by sea; and Hugh might indeed

have hired a boat at Slaughden Quay if he dared; but he feared to be recognized as having come from Whitestrand to make inquiries about the unclaimed body; for to rouse suspicion would be doubly unwise: he felt like a murderer, and he considered himself one by implication already. If other people grew to suspect that Elsie was drowned, it would go hard but they would think as ill of him as he himself thought of himself in his bitterest moments.

For, horrible to relate, all this time, with that burden of agony and anguish and suspense weighing down his soul like a mass of lead, he had had to play as best he might, every night and morning, at the ardour of young love with that girl Winifred. He had had to imitate with hateful skill the wantonness of youth and the ecstasy of the happily betrothed lover. He had had to wear a mask of pleasure on his pinched face while his heart within was full of bitterness, as he cried to himself more than once in his reckless agony. After such unnatural restraint, reaction was inevitable. It became a delight to him to get away for once from that grim

comedy, in which he acted his part with so much apparent ease, and to face the genuine tragedy of his miserable life, alone and undisturbed with his own remorseful thoughts for a few short hours or so. He looked upon that fierce tramp in the eye of the sun, trudging ever on over those baking stones, and through that barren spit of sand and shingle, to some extent in the light of a self-imposed penance—a penance, and yet a splendid indulgence as well; for here there was no one to watch or observe him. Here he could let the tears trickle down his face unreprieved, and no longer pretend to believe himself happy. Here there was no Winifred to tease him with her love. He had sold his own soul for a few wretched acres of stagnant salt marsh: he could gloat now at his ease over his hateful bargain; he could call himself “Fool” at the top of his voice; he could groan and sigh and be as sad as night, no man hindering him. It was an orgy of remorse, and he gave way to it with wild orgiastic fervour.

He plodded, plodded, plodded ever on, stumbling wearily over that endless shingle,

thirsty and footsore, mile after mile, yet glad to be relieved for a while from the strain of his long hypocrisy, and to let the tears flow easily and naturally one after the other down his parched cheek. Truly he walked in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. The iron was entering into his own soul; and yet he hugged it. The gloom of that barren stretch of water-worn pebbles, the weird and widespread desolation of the landscape, the fierce glare of the midday sun that poured down mercilessly on his aching head, all chimed in congenially with his present brooding and melancholy humour, and gave strength to the poignancy of his remorse and regret. He could torture himself to the bone in these small matters, for dead Elsie's sake; he could do penance, but not make restitution. He couldn't even so tell out the truth before the whole world, or right the two women he had cruelly wronged, by an open confession.

At last, after mile upon mile of weary staggering, he reached the Low Light, and sat down, exhausted, on the bare shingle just outside the lighthouse-keeper's quarters. Strangers are rare at Orfordness; and a

morose-looking man, soured by solitude, soon presented himself at the door to stare at the new-comer.

"Tramped it?" he asked curtly with an inquiring glance along the shingle beach.

"Yes, tramped it," Hugh answered with a weary sigh, and relapsed into silence, too utterly tired to think of how he had best set about the prosecution of his delicate inquiry, now that he had got there.

The man stood with his hand on his hip, and watched the stranger long and close, with frank mute curiosity, as one watches a wild beast in its cage at a menagerie. At last he broke the solemn silence once more with the one inquisitive word, "Why?"

"Amusement," Hugh answered, catching the man's laconic humour to the very echo.

For twenty minutes they talked on, in this brief disjointed Spartan fashion, with question and answer as to the life at Orfordness tossed to and fro like a quick ball between them, till at last Hugh touched, as if by accident, but with supreme skill, upon the abstract question of provisioning lighthouses.

"Trinity House steam-cutter," the man

replied to his short suggested query, with a sidelong jerk of his head to southward. "Twice a month. Pritty fair grub. Biscuit and pork an' tinned meat an' soo on."

"Queer employment, the cutter's men," Hugh interposed quietly. "Must see a deal of life in their way sometimes."

The man nodded. "Yis, an' death too," he assented with uncompromising brevity.

"Wrecks?"

"*And* corpusus."

"Corpses?"

"Ah, corpusus, I believe you. Drownded ones. Plenty on 'em."

"Here?"

"Sometimes. But moostly on the north side. Drift wooth the tide. Cutter's man found one oonly a week agoo last Sarraday. Oover hinder against that groyne to windwud."

"Sailor?"

"Not this time—gal—young woman."

"Where did she come from?" Hugh asked eagerly, yet suppressing his eagerness in his face and voice as well as he was able.

"Doon't know, u'm sure," the man answered with something very like a shrug.

"They doon't carry their naames and poorts wroot on their foreheads as though they wor vessels. Lowestof, Whitestrand, Southwold, Aldeburgh—might ha' bin any on 'em.

Hugh continued his inquiries with breathless interest a few minutes longer; then he asked again in a trembling voice: "Any jewelry on her?"

The man eyed him suspiciously askance. Detective in disguise, or what? he wondered. "Ast the cutter's man," he drawled out slowly, after a long pause. "If there was anything valable on the corpse, t'een't likely he'd leave it about har for the coroner to nail—not he!"

The answer cast an unexpected flood of light on the seafaring view of the treasure-trove of corpses, for which Hugh had hardly before been prepared in his own mind. That would account for her not having been recognized. "Did they hold an inquest?" he ventured to ask nervously.

The lighthouse-man nodded. "But whot's the use o' that?—noo evidence," he continued "Moost o' these drowned bodies aren't 'dentified. Jury browt it in 'Found

drowneded.' Convenient vardick—save a lot o' trouble."

"Where do you bury them?" Hugh asked, hardly able to control his emotion.

The man waved his hand with a careless dash towards a sandy patch just beyond the High Light. "Oover hinder," he answered. "There's shiploads on 'em there. Easy diggin'. Easier than the shingle. We buried the crew of a Hamburg brigantine there all in a lump last winter. They went ashore on the Oaze Sands. All hands drowneded, about a baker's dozen on 'em. Coroner came oover from Orford an' set on 'em, here on the spot, as yow may say. That's consecrated ground. Bishop came from Norwich and said his prayers oover it. A corpse coon't lay better, nor more comfortable, if it come to that, in Woodbridge Cemmetry."

He laughed low to himself at his own grim wit; and Hugh, unable to conceal his disgust, walked off alone, as if idly strolling in a solitary mood, towards that desolate graveyard. The lighthouse-man went back, rolling a quid in his bulged cheek, to his monotonous

avocations. Hugh stumbled over the sand with blinded eyes and tottering feet till he reached the plot with its little group of rude mounds. There was one mound far newer and fresher than all the rest, and a wooden label stood at its head with a number roughly scrawled on it in wet paint—"240." His heart failed and sank within him. So this was *her* grave!—Elsie's grave! Elsie, Elsie, poor, desolate, abandoned, heart-broken Elsie.—He took off his hat in reverent remorse as he stood by its side. Oh, heavens, how he longed to be dead there with her! Should he fling himself off the top of the lighthouse now? Should he cut his throat beside her nameless grave? Should he drown himself with Elsie on that hopeless stretch of wild coast? Or should he live on still, a miserable, wretched, self-condemned coward, to pay the penalty of his cruelty and his baseness through years of agony?

Elsie's grave! If only he could be sure it was really Elsie's! He wished he could. In time, then, he might venture to put up a headstone with just her initials—those sacred initials. But no; he dared not. And per-

haps, after all, it might not be Elsie. Corpses came up here often and often. Had they not buried whole shiploads together, as the lighthouse-man assured him, after a terrible tempest?

He stood there long, bareheaded in the sun. His remorse was gnawing the very life out of him. He was rooted to the spot. Elsie held him spellbound. At length he roused himself, and with a terrible effort returned to the lighthouse. "Where did you say this last body came up?" he asked the man in as careless a voice as he could easily master.

The man eyed him sharp and hard. "Yow fare anxious about that there young woman," he answered coldly. "She floated longside by the groyne oover hinder. Tide flung har up. That's where they moostly do come ashore from Lowstof or Whitestrand. Current sweep 'em right along the coost till they reach the ness: then it fling 'em up by the groyne as reg'lar as clockwork. There's a cross-current there; that's what make the point and the sandbank."

Hugh faltered. He knew full well he was rousing suspicion; yet he couldn't refrain for

all that from gratifying his eager and burning desire to know all he could about poor martyred Elsie. He dared not ask what had become of the clothes, much as he longed to learn, but he wandered away slowly, step after step, to the side of the groyne. Its further face was sheltered by heaped-up shingle from the lighthouse-man's eye. Hugh sat down in the shade, close under the timber barks, and looked around him along the beach where Elsie had been washed ashore, a lifeless burden. Something yellow glittered on the sands hard by. As the sun caught it, it attracted for a second his casual attention by its golden shimmering. His heart came up with a bound into his mouth. He knew it—he knew it—he knew it in a flash. It was Elsie's watch! Elsie's! Elsie's! The watch he himself had given—years and years ago—no; six weeks since only—as a birthday present—to poor dear dead Elsie.

Then Elsie was dead! He was sure of it now. No need for further dangerous questioning. It was by Elsie's grave indeed he had just been standing. Elsie lay buried there beyond the shadow of a doubt, unknown

and dishonoured. It was Elsie's grave and Elsie's watch. What room for hope or for fear any longer?

It was Elsie's watch, but rolled by the current from Lowestoft pier, as the lighthouse-man had rightly told him was usual, and cast ashore, as everything else was always cast, by the side of the groyne where the stream in the sea turned sharply outward at the extreme easternmost point of Suffolk.

He picked it up with tremulous fingers and kissed it tenderly; then he slipped it unobserved into his breast-pocket, close to his heart—Elsie's watch!—and began his return journey with an aching bosom, over those hot bare stones, away back to Aldeburgh. The beach seemed longer and drearier than before. The orgy of remorse had passed away now, and the coolness of utter despair had come over him instead of it. Half-way on, he sat down at last, wearier than ever, on the long pebble ridge, and gazed once more with swimming eyes at that visible token of Elsie's doom. Hope was dead in his heart now. Horror and agony brooded over his soul. The world without was dull and dreary; the world within

was a tempest of passion. He would freely have given all he possessed that moment to be dead and buried in one grave with Elsie.

At that same instant at the Low Light the cutter's man, come across in an open boat from Orford, was talking carelessly to the underling at the lighthouse.

"Well, Tom, bor, how're things lookin' wi' yow?" he asked with a laugh.

"Middlin' like, an' that stodgy," the other answered grimly. "How do yow git on?"

"Well, we ha' tracked down that there body," the Trinity House man said casually; "the gal's, I mean, what I picked up on the ness; an' arter all my trouble, Tom, yow'll hardly believe it, but blow me if I made a penny on it."

"Yow din't?" the lighthouse-man murmured interrogatively.

"Not a farden," the fellow Bill responded in a disconsolate voice. "The body worn't a nob's; so far, in that respeck, she worn't nobody arter all, but oonly one o' them there light-o'-loves down hinder at Lowstof. She was a sailor's moll, I reckon. Flung harsel off Lowstof pier one dark night, maybe a

fortnight ago, or maybe three weeks. She'd bin hevin' some wuds wooth a young man she'd bin a-keepin' company wooth. I never see a more promisin' or more disappointin' corpse in my breathin' life. When I picked har up, I say to Jim, I say, 'Yow may take yar davy on't, bor, that this gal *is* a nob. I goo by har looks, an' I 'spect there's money on har.' Why, har dress aloon would ha' made any one take har for a real lady. And arter all, what do it amount to? Nothen at all! Jest the parish paay for har. That's Suffolk all oover, and rile me when I think on't. If it han't a bin for a val'able in the way o' rings what fell off har finger, in a manner of speakin', and dropped as yow may say into an honest man's pocket when he was a-takin' har to the dead-house—why, it fare to me, that there honest man would a bin out o' pocket a marter of a shillen or soo, and all thraow the interest he took in a wuthless an' good-for-nothen young woman. Corpsus may look out for theirselves in future as far as I'm consarned, and that's to a sartinty. I ha' had too much on 'em. They're more bother than they're wuth. That's jest the long an' short on't—blow me if it een't."

CHAPTER XIX.

AU RENDEZVOUS DES BONS CAMARADES.

IN the cosy smoking-room of the Cheyne Row Club, a group of budding geniuses, convened from the four quarters of the earth, stood once more in the bay-window, looking out on the dull October street, and discussing with one another in diverse tones the various means which each had adopted for killing time through his own modicum of summer holidays. Reminiscences and greetings were the order of the day. A buzz of voices pervaded the air. Everybody was full to the throat of fresh impressions, and everybody was laudably eager to share them all, still hot from the press, with the balance of humanity as then and there represented before him.—The mosquitoes at the North Cape were really unendurable: they bit a piece out of

your face bodily, and then perched on a neighbouring tree to eat it; while the midnight sun, as advertised, was a hoary old impostor, exactly like any other sun anywhere, when you came to examine him through a smoked glass at close quarters.

Cromer was just the jolliest place to lounge on the sands, and the best centre for short excursions, that a fellow could find on a year's tramp all round the shores of England, Scotland, Wales, or Ireland.

Grouse were scanty and devilish cunning in Aberdeenshire this year; the young birds packed like old ones; and the accommodation at Lumphanan had turned out on nearer view by no means what it ought to be.

A most delightful time indeed at Beatenberg, just above the Lake of Thun, you know, with exquisite views over the Bernese Oberland; and *such* a pretty little Swiss maiden, with liquid blue eyes and tow-coloured hair, to bring in one's breakfast and pour out coffee in the thick white coffee-cups. And then the flowers!—a perfect paradise for a botanist, I assure you.

Montreal in August was hot and stuffy,

but the Thousand Islands were simply delicious, and black-bass fishing among the back lakes was the only sport now left alive worthy a British fisherman's distinguished consideration.

Oh yes; the yacht behaved very well indeed, considering, on her way to Iceland—as well as any yacht that sailed the seas—but just before reaching Reykjavik—that's how they pronounce it, with the *j* soft and a falling intonation on the last syllable—a most tremendous gale came thundering down with rain and lightning from the Vatna Jökull, and, by George, sir, it nearly foundered her outright with its sudden squalls in the open ocean. You never saw anything like the way she heeled over: you could touch the trough of the waves every time from the gunwale.

Had anything new been going on, you fellows, while we were all away? and had anybody heard anything about the Bard, as Cheyne Row had unanimously nicknamed Hugh Massinger?

Yes, one budding genius in the descriptive-article trade—writer of that interesting series

of papers in the *Charing Cross Review* on Seaside Resorts—afterwards reprinted in crown octavo fancy boards, at seven-and-sixpence, as *The Complete Idler*—had had a letter from the Bard himself only three days ago, announcing his intention to be back in harness in town again that very morning.

“And what’s the Immortal Singer been doing with himself this hot summer?” cried a dozen voices—for it was generally felt in Cheyne Row circles that Hugh Massinger, though still as undiscovered as the sources of the Congo, was a coming man of proximate eventuality. “Has he hooked his heiress yet? He swore, when he left town in July, he was going on an angling expedition—as a fisher of women—in the eastern counties.”

“Well, yes,” the recipient of young love’s first confidences responded guardedly; “I should say he had.—To be sure, the Immortal One doesn’t exactly mention the fact or amount of the young lady’s fortune; but he does casually remark in a single passing sentence that he has got himself engaged to a Thing of Beauty somewhere down in Suffolk.”

“Suffolk!—most congruous indeed for an idyllic, bucolic, impressionist poet.—He’ll come back to town with a wreath round his hat, and his pockets stuffed with stanzas and sonnets to his mistress’s eyebrow, where ‘Suffolk punches’ shall sweetly rhyme to ‘the red-cheek apple that she gaily munches,’ with slight excursions on lunches, bunches, crunches, and hunches, all à la Massinger, in endless profusion.—Now then, Hatherley; there’s a guinea’s worth ready made for you to your hand already. Send it by the first post yourself to the lady, and cut out the Bard on his own ground with the beautiful and anonymous East Anglian heiress.—I suppose, by the way, Massinger didn’t happen to confide to you the local habitation and the name of the proud recipient of so much interested and anapæstic devotion?”

“He said, I think, if I remember right, her name was Meysey.”

“Meysey. Oh, then, that’s one of the Whitestrand Meyseys, you may be sure; daughter of old Tom Wyville Meysey, whose estates have all been swallowed up by the sea. They lie in the prebend of Consumptum per

Mare.—If he's going to marry her on the strength of her red, red gold, or of her vested securities in Argentine and Turkish, he'll have to collect his arrears of income from a sea-green mermaid—at the bottom of the deep blue sea ; which will be worse than even dealing with that horrid Land League, for the Queen's writ doesn't run beyond the fore-shore, and No Rent is universal law on the bed of the ocean."

"I don't think they've all been quite swallowed up," one of the bystanders remarked in a pensive voice : he was Suffolk born ; "at least, not yet, as far as I've heard of them. The devouring sea is engaged in taking them a bite at a time, like Bob Sawyer's apple ; but he's left the Hall and the lands about it to the present day—so Relf tells me."

"Has she money, I wonder ?" the editor of that struggling periodical, the *Night-Jar*, remarked abstractedly.

"Oh, I expect so, or the Bard wouldn't ever have dreamt of proposing to her. The Immortal Singer knows his own worth exactly, to four places of decimals, and estimates himself at full market value. He's the

last man on earth to throw himself away for a mere trifle. When he sells his soul in the matrimonial Exchange, it'll be for the highest current market quotation, to an eligible purchaser for cash only, who must combine considerable charms of body and mind with the superadded advantage of a respectable balance at Drummond's or at Coutts's. The Bard knows down to the ground the exact money-worth of a handsome poet; he wouldn't dream of letting himself go dirt cheap, like a common every-day historian or novelist."

As the last speaker let the words drop carelessly from his mouth, the buzz of voices in the smoke-room paused suddenly: there was a slight and awkward lull in the conversation for half a minute; and then the crowd of budding geniuses was stretching out its dozen right hands with singular unanimity in rapid succession to grasp the fingers of a tall dark new-comer who had slipped in, after the fashion usually attributed to angels or their opposite, in the very nick of time to catch the last echoes of a candid opinion from his peers and contemporaries upon his own conduct.

"Do you think he heard us?" one of the

peccant gossipers whispered to another with a scared face.

"Can't say," his friend whispered back uneasily. "He's got quick ears. Listeners generally hear no good of themselves. But anyhow, we've got to brazen it out now. The best way's just to take the bull by the horns boldly.—Well, Massinger, we were all talking about you when you came in. You're the chief subject of conversation in literary circles at the present day. Do you know it's going the round of all the clubs in London at this moment that you shortly contemplate committing matrimony?"

Hugh Massinger drew himself up stiff and erect to his full height, and withered his questioner with a scathing glance from his dark eyes such as only he could dart at will to scarify and annihilate a selected victim. "I'm going to be married in the course of the year," he answered coldly, "if that's what you mean by committing matrimony.—Mitchison," turning round with marked abruptness to an earlier speaker, "what have you been doing with yourself all the summer?"

“ Oh, I’ve been riding a bicycle through the best part of Finland, getting up a set of articles on the picturesque aspect of the Far North for the *Porte-Crayon*, you know, and at the same time working in the Russian anarchists for the leader column in the *Morning Telephone*.—Bates went with me on the illegitimate machine—yes, that means a tricycle; the bicycle alone’s accounted lawful: he’s doing the sketches to illustrate my letterpress, or I’m doing the letterpress to illustrate his sketches—whichever you please, my little dear; you pays your money and you takes your choice, all for the small sum of sixpence weekly. The roads in Finland are abominably rough, and the Finnish language is the beastliest and most agglutinative I ever had to deal with, even in the entrancing pages of Ollendorff. But there’s good copy in it—very good copy.—The *Telephone* and the *Porte-Crayon* shared our expenses.—And where have you been hiding your light yourself since we last saw you ? ”

“ My particular bushel was somewhere down about Suffolk, I believe,” Hugh Mas-singer answered with magnificent indefinite-

ness, as though minute accuracy to the matter of a county or two were rather beneath his sublime consideration. "I've been stopping at a dead-alive little place they call Whitestrand: a sort of moribund fishing village, minus the fish. It's a lost corner among the mud-flats and the salt marshes; picturesque, but ugly, and dull as ditch-water. And having nothing else on earth to do there, I occupied myself with getting engaged, as you fellows seem to have heard by telegraph already. This is an age of publicity. Everything's known in London nowadays. A man can't change his coat, it appears, or have venison for dinner, or wear red stockings, or stop to chat with a pretty woman, but he finds a flaring paragraph about it next day in the society papers."

"May one venture to ask the lady's name?" Mitchison inquired courteously, a little apart from the main group.

Hugh Massinger's manner melted at once. He would not be chaffed, but it rather relieved him, in his present strained condition of mind, to enter into inoffensive confidences with a polite listener.

“She’s a Miss Meysey,” he said in a lower tone, drawing over towards the fireplace: “one of the Suffolk Meyseys—you’ve heard of the family. Her father has a very nice place down by the sea at Whitestrand. They’re the banking people, you know: remote cousins of the old hanging judge’s. Very nice old things in their own way, though a trifle slow and out of date—not to say mouldy.—But after all, rapidity is hardly the precise quality one feels called upon to exact in a prospective father-in-law: slowness goes with some solid virtues. The honoured tortoise has never been accused by its deadliest foes of wasting its patrimony in extravagant expenditure.”

“Has she any brothers?” Mitchison asked with apparent ingenuousness, approaching the question of Miss Meysey’s fortune (like Hugh himself) by obscure byways, as being a politer mode than the direct assault. “There was a fellow called Meysey in the fifth form with me at Winchester, I remember; perhaps he might have been some sort of relation.”

Hugh shook his head in emphatic dissent.

"No," he answered; "the girl has no brothers. She's an only child—the last of her family. There was one son, a captain in the Forty-fourth, or something of the sort; but he was killed in Zululand, and was never at Winchester, or I'm sure I should have heard of it. —They're a kinless lot, extremely kinless: in fact I've almost realized the highest ambition of the American humorist, to the effect that he might have the luck to marry a poor lonely friendless orphan."

"She's an heiress, then?"

Hugh nodded assent. "Well, a sort of an heiress," he admitted modestly, as who should say, "not so good as she might be." "The estate's been very much impaired by the inroads of the sea for the last ten years; but there's still a decent remnant of it left standing. Enough for a man of modest expectations to make a living off in these hard times, I fancy."

"Then we shall all come down in due time," another man put in—a painter by trade—joining the group as he spoke, "and find the Bard a landed proprietor on his own broad acres, living in state and bounty in the

baronial Hall, lord of Burleigh, fair and free, or whatever other name the place may be called by!"

"If I invite you to come," Hugh answered significantly with curt emphasis.

"Ah yes, of course," the artist answered. "I dare say when you start your carriage, you'll be too proud to remember a poor devil of an oil and colour-man like me.—In those days, no doubt you'll migrate like all the rest to the Athenæum.—Well, well, the world moves—once every twenty-four hours on its own axis—and in the long run we all move with it and go up together.—When I'm an R.A., I'll run down and visit you at the ancestral mansion, and perhaps paint your wife's portrait—for a thousand guineas, *bien entendu*.—And what sort of a body is the prospective father-in-law?"

"Oh, just the usual type of Suffolk Squire, don't you know," Massinger replied carelessly. "A breeder of fat oxen and of pigs, a pamphleteer on Guano and on Grain, a quarter-sessions chairman, abler none; but with faint reminiscences still of an Oxford training left in him to keep the milk of

human kindness from turning sour by long exposure to the pernicious influence of the East Anglian sunshine. I should enjoy his society better, however, if I were a trifle deaf. He has less to say, and says it more, than any other man of my acquaintance. Still, he's a jolly old boy enough, as old boys go. We shall rub along somehow till he pops off the hooks and leaves us the paternal acres on our own account to make merry upon."

So far, Hugh had tried with decent success to keep up his usual appearance of careless ease and languid good-humour, in spite of volcanic internal desires to avoid the painful subject of his approaching marriage altogether. He was schooling himself, indeed, to face society. He was sure to hear much of his Suffolk trip, and it was well to get used to it as early as possible. But the next question fairly blanched his cheek, by leading up direct to the skeleton in the cupboard: "How did you first come to get acquainted with them?"

The question must inevitably be asked again, and he must do his best to face it with pretended equanimity. "A relation of mine

—a distant cousin—a Girton girl—was living with the family as Miss Meysey's governess or companion or something," he answered with what jauntiness he could summon up. "It was through her that I first got to know my future wife. And old Mr. Meysey, the coming papa-in-law——"

He stopped dead short. Words failed him. His jaw fell abruptly. A strange thrill seemed to course through his frame. His large black eyes protruded suddenly from their sunken orbits; his olive-coloured cheek blanched pale and pasty. Some unexpected emotion had evidently checked his ready flow of speech. Mitchison and the painter turned round in surprise to see what might be the cause of this unwonted flutter. It was merely Warren Relf who had entered the club, and was gazing with a stony British stare from head to foot at Hugh Massinger.

The poet wavered, but he did not flinch. From the fixed look in Relf's eye, he felt certain in an instant that the skipper of the *Mud-Turtle* knew something—if not everything—of his fatal secret. How much did he know? and how much not?—that was the

question. Had he tracked Elsie to her nameless grave at Orfordness? Had he recognized the body in the mortuary at the lighthouse? Had he learned from the cutter's man the horrid truth as to the corpse's identity? All these things or any one of them might well have happened to the owner of the *Mud-Turtle*, cruising in and out of East Anglian creeks in his ubiquitous little vessel. Warren Relf was plainly a dangerous subject. But in any case, Hugh thought with shame, how rash, how imprudent, how unworthy of himself thus to betray in his own face and features the terror and astonishment with which he regarded him! He might have known Relf was likely to drop in any day at the club! He might have known he would sooner or later meet him there! He might have prepared beforehand a neat little lie to deliver pat with a casual air of truth on their first greeting! And instead of all that, here he was, discomposed and startled, gazing the painter straight in the face like a dazed fool, and never knowing how or where on earth to start any ordinary subject of polite conversation. For the first

time in his adult life he was so taken aback with childish awe and mute surprise that he felt positively relieved when Relf boarded him with the double-barrelled question : “ And how did you leave Miss Meysey and Miss Challoner, Massinger ? ”

Hugh drew him aside towards the back of the room and lowered his voice still more markedly in reply. “ I left Miss Meysey very well,” he answered with as much ease of manner as he could hastily assume. “ You may perhaps have heard from rumour or from the public prints that she and I have struck up an engagement. In the lucid language of the newspaper announcements, a marriage has been definitely arranged between us.”

Warren Relf bent his head in sober acquiescence. “ I had heard so,” he said with grim formality. “ Your siege was successful. You carried the citadel by storm that day in the sandhills.—I won’t congratulate you. You know my opinion already of marriages arranged upon that mercantile basis. I told it you beforehand. We need not now recur to the subject.—But Miss

Challoner?—How about her? Did you leave her well? Is she still at Whitestrand?" He looked his man through and through as he spoke, with a cold stern light in those truthful eyes of his.

Hugh Massinger shuffled uneasily before his steadfast glance. Was it only his own poor guilty conscience, or did Relf know all? he wondered silently. The man was eyeing him like his evil angel. He longed for time to pause and reflect; to think out the best possible non-committing lie in answer to this direct and leading question. How to parry that deadly thrust on the spur of the moment he knew not. Relf was gazing at him still intently. Hesitation would be fatal. He blundered into the first form of answer that came uppermost. "My cousin Elsie has gone away," he stammered out in haste. "She—she left the Meyseys quite abruptly."

"As a consequence of your engagement?" Relf asked sternly.

This was going one step too far. Hugh Massinger felt really indignant now, and his indignation enabled him to cover his retreat a little more gracefully. "You have no

right to ask me that," he answered in genuine anger. "My private relations with my own family are surely no concern of yours or of any one's."

Warren Relf bowed his head grimly once more. "Where has she gone?" he asked in a searching voice. "I'm interested in Miss Challoner. I may venture to inquire that much at least. I'm told you've heard from her. Where is she now? Will you kindly tell me?"

"I don't know," Hugh answered angrily, driven to bay. Then with a sudden inspiration, he added significantly: "Do you either?"

"Yes," Warren Relf responded with solemn directness.

The answer took Massinger aback once more. A cold shudder ran down his spine. Their eyes met. For a moment they stared one another out. Then Hugh's glance fell slowly and heavily. He dared not ask one word more.—Relf must have tracked her, for certain, to the lighthouse. He must have seen the grave, perhaps even the body.—This was too terrible.—Henceforth, it was war to the knife between them. "Hast thou

found me, O my enemy?" he broke out sullenly.

"I have found you, Massinger, and I have found you out," the painter answered in a very low voice, with a sudden burst of unpremeditated frankness. "I know you now for exactly the very creature you are—a liar, a forger, a coward, and only two fingers' width short of a murderer.—There! you may make what use you like of that.—For myself, I will make no use at all of it.—For reasons of my own, I will let you go. I could crush you if I would, but I prefer to screen you. Still, I tell you once for all the truth. Remember it well.—I know it; you know it; and we both know we each of us know it."

Hugh Massinger's fingers itched inexpressibly that moment to close round the painter's honest bronzed throat in a wild death-struggle. He was a passionate man, and the provocation was terrible. The provocation was terrible because it was all true. He was a liar, a forger, a coward—and a murderer! —But he dared not—he dared not. To thrust these hateful words down Relf's throat would be to court exposure, and worse than

exposure ; and exposure was just what Hugh Massinger could never bear to face like a man. Sooner than that, the river, or aconite. He must swallow it all, proud soul as he was. He must swallow it all, now and for ever.

As he stood there irresolute, with blanched lips and itching fingers, his nails pressed hard into the palms of his hands in the fierce endeavour to repress his passion, he felt a sudden light touch on his right shoulder. It was Hatherley once more. "I say, Massinger," the journalist put in lightly, all unconscious of the tragedy he was interrupting, "come down and knock about the balls on the table a bit, will you?"

If Hugh Massinger was to go on living at all, he must go on living in the wonted fashion of nineteenth-century literate humanity. Tragedy must hide itself behind the scenes ; in public he must still be the prince of high comedians. He unclosed his hands and let go his breath with a terrible effort. Relf stood aside to let him pass. Their glances met as Hugh left the room arm in arm with Hatherley. Relf's was a glance of contempt

and scorn ; Hugh Massinger's was one of undying hatred.

He had murdered Elsie, and Relf knew it. That was the way Massinger interpreted to himself the "Yes" that the painter had just now so truthfully and directly answered him.

CHAPTER XX.

EVENTS MARCH.

"PAPA is still in Scotland," Winifred wrote to Hugh, "slaying many grouse; and mamma and I have the place all to ourselves now, so we're really having a lovely time, enjoying our holiday *immensely* (though you're not here), taking down everything, and washing and polishing, and rearranging things again, and playing havoc with the household gods generally. We expect papa back on Friday. His birds have preceded him. I *do* hope he remembered to send you a brace or two. I gave him your town address before he left, with *very* special directions to let you have some; but, you know, you men always forget everything. As soon as he comes home, he'll make us take our alterations all down again, which will be a horrid nuisance, for the

drawing-room *does* look so perfectly lovely. We've done it up exactly as you recommended, with the sage green plush for the old mantel-piece, and a red Japanese table in the dark corner; and I really think, now I see the effect, your taste's simply exquisite. But then, you know, what else can you expect from a distinguished poet! You always do everything beautifully—and I think you're a darling."

At any other time this naïve girlish appreciation of his decorative talents would have pleased and flattered Hugh's susceptible soul; for, being a man, he was of course vain; and he loved a pretty girl's approbation dearly. But just at that moment he had no stomach for praise, even though it came from Sir Hubert Stanley; and whatever faint rising flush of pleasure he might possibly have felt at his little *fiancée's* ecstatic admiration was all crushed down again into the gall of bitterness by the sickening refrain of her repeated postscripts: "No further news yet from poor Elsie.—Has she written to you? I shall be simply *frantic* if I don't hear from her soon. She can *never* mean to leave us all in doubt

like this. I'm going to advertise to-morrow in the London papers. If only she knew the state of mind she was plunging me into, I'm sure she'd write and relieve my suspense, which is just *agonizing*.—A kiss from your little one : in the corner here. Be sure you kiss it where I've put the cross. Good night, darling Hugh.—Yours ever, WINIFRED."

Hugh flung the letter down on the floor of his chambers in an agony of horror. Was his crime to pursue him thus through a whole lifetime? Was he always to hear surmises, conjectures, speculations, doubts as to what on earth had become of Elsie? Was he never to be free for a single second from the shadow of that awful pursuing episode? Was Winifred, when she became his wedded wife, to torture and rack him for years together with questions and hesitations about the poor dead child who lay, as he firmly and unreservedly believed, in her nameless grave by the light-house at Orfordness?—There was only one possible way out of it—a way that Hugh shrank from almost as much as he shrank from the terror and shame of exposure. It was ghastly : it was gruesome : it was past

endurance ; but it was the one solitary way of safety. He must write a letter from time to time, in Elsie's handwriting, addressed to Winifred, giving a fictitious account of Elsie's doings in an imaginary home, away over somewhere in America or the antipodes. He must invent a new life and a new life-history, under the Southern Cross, for poor dead Elsie : he must keep her alive like a character in a novel, and spin her fresh surroundings from his own brain, in some little-known and inaccessible quarter of the universe.

But then, what a slavery, what a drudgery, what a perpetual torture ! His soul shrank from the hideous continued deceit. To have perpetrated that one old fatal forgery, in the first fresh flush of terror and remorse, was not perhaps quite so wicked, quite so horrible, quite so soul-destroying as this new departure. He had then at least the poor lame excuse of a pressing emergency ; and it was once only. But to live a life of consistent lying—to go on fathering a perennial fraud—to forge pretended letters from mail to mail—to invent a long tissue of successful falsehoods—and that about a matter that lay

nearest and dearest to his own wounded and remorseful heart—all this was utterly and wholly repugnant to Hugh Massinger's underlying nature. Set aside the wickedness and baseness of it all, the poet was a proud and sensitive man; and lying on such an extended scale was abhorrent to his soul from its mere ignominy and æsthetic repulsiveness. He liked the truth: he admired the open, frank, straightforward way. Tortuous cunning and mean subterfuges roused his profoundest contempt and loathing—when he saw them in others. Up till now, he had enjoyed his own unquestioning self-respect. Vain and shallow and unscrupulous as he was, he had hitherto basked serenely in the sunshine of his own personal approbation. He had done nothing till lately that sinned against his private and peculiar code of morals, such as it was. His proposal to Winifred had, for the first time, opened the sluices of the great unknown within him, and fathomless depths of deceit and crime were welling up now and crowding in upon him to drown and obliterate whatever spark or scintillation of conscience had ever been his.

It was a hateful sight. He shrank himself from the effort to realize it.

And Warren Relf knew all! That in itself was bad enough. But if he also invented a continuous lie to palm off upon Winifred and her unsuspecting people, then Warren Relf at least would know it constantly for what it was, and despise him for it even more profoundly than he despised him at present. All that was horrible—horrible—horrible. Yet there was one person whose opinion mattered to him far more than even Warren Relf's—one person who would hate and despise with a deadly hatred and an utter scorn the horrid perfidy of his proposed line of conduct. That person was one with whom he eat and drank familiarly every day, with whom he conversed unreservedly night and morning, with whom he lived and moved and had his being. He could never escape or deceive or outwit Hugh Massinger. *Patriæ quis exsul se quoque fugit?* Hugh Massinger would dog him, and follow his footsteps wherever he went, with his unfeigned contempt for so dirty and despicable a course of action. It was vile, it was loathsome, it was mean, it was horrible

in its ghastly charnel-house falseness and foulness; and Hugh Massinger knew it perfectly. If he yielded to this last and lowest temptation of Satan, he might walk about henceforth with his outer man a whited sepulchre, but within, he would be full of dead men's bones and vile imaginings of impossible evil.

Thinking which things definitely to himself, in his own tormented and horrified soul, he—sat down and wrote another forged letter.

It was a hasty note, written as if in the hurry and bustle of departure, on the very eve of a long journey, and it told Winifred, in rapid general terms, that Elsie was just on her way to the continent, *en route* for Australia—no matter where. She would join her steamer (no line mentioned) under an assumed name, perhaps at Marseilles, perhaps at Genoa, perhaps at Naples, perhaps at Brindisi. Useless to dream of tracking or identifying her. She was going away from England *for ever and ever*—this last underlined in feminine fashion—and it would be quite hopeless for Winifred to cherish the vain idea of seeing her again in this world of misfortunes. Some

day, perhaps, her conduct would be explained and vindicated ; for the present, it must suffice that letters sent to her at the address as before—the porter's of the Cheyne Row Club, though Hugh did not specifically mention that fact—would finally reach her by private arrangement. Would Winifred accept the accompanying ring, and wear it always on her own finger, as a parting gift from her affectionate and misunderstood friend, *ELSIE* ?

The ring was one from the little jewel-case he had stolen that fatal night from Elsie's bedroom. Profoundly as he hated and loathed himself for his deception, he couldn't help stopping half way through to admire his own devilry of cleverness in sending that ring back now to Winifred. Nothing could be so calculated to disarm suspicion. Who could doubt that Elsie was indeed alive, when Elsie not only wrote letters to her friends, but sent with them the very jewelry from her own fingers as a visible pledge and token of her identity ?—Besides, he really wanted Winifred to wear it ; he wished her to have something that once was Elsie's. He would like the woman he was now deceiving to be linked

by some visible bond of memory to the woman he had deceived and lured to her destruction.

He kissed the ring, a hot burning kiss, and wrapped it reverently and tenderly in cotton-wool. That done, he gummed and stamped the letter with a resolute air, crushed his hat firmly down on his head, and strode out with feverishly long strides from his rooms in Jermyn Street to the doubtful hospitality of the Cheyne Row.

Would Warren Relf be there again, he wondered? Was that man to poison half London for him in future?—Why on earth, knowing the whole truth about Elsie—knowing that Elsie was dead and buried at Orfordness—did the fellow mean to hold his vile tongue and allow him, Hugh Massinger, to put about this elaborate fiction unchecked, of her sudden and causeless disappearance? Inexplicable quite! The thing was a mystery; and Hugh Massinger hated mysteries. He could never know now at what unexpected moment Warren Relf might swoop down upon him from behind with a dash and a crash and an explosive exposure.—He was working in the dark, like navvies in a tunnel.

—Surely the crash must come some day ! The roof must collapse and crush him utterly. It was ghastly to wait in long blind expectation of it.

The forged letter still remained in his pocket unposted. He passed a couple of pillar-boxes, but could not nerve himself up to drop it in. Some grain of grace within him was fighting hard even now for the mastery of his soul. He shrank from committing himself irrevocably by a single act to that despicable life of ingrained deception.

In the smoking-room at the club he found nobody, for it was still early. He took up the *Times*, which he had not yet had time to consult that morning. In the Agony Column, a familiar conjunction of names attracted his eye as it moved down the outer sheet. They were the two names never out of his thoughts for a moment for the last fortnight. "ELSIE," the advertisement ran in clear black type, "Do write to me. I can stand this fearful suspense no longer. Only a few lines to say you are well. I am so frightened. Ever yours, WINIFRED."

He laid the paper down with a sudden

resolve, and striding across the room gloomily to the letter-box on the mantel-piece, took the fateful envelope from his pocket at last, and held it dubious, between finger and thumb, dangling loose over the slit in the lid. Heaven and hell still battled fiercely for the upper hand within him. Should he drop it in boldly, or should he not? To be or not to be—a liar for life?—that was the question. The envelope trembled between his finger and thumb. The slit in the box yawned hungry below. His grasp was lax. The letter hung by a corner only. Nor was his impulse, even, so wholly bad: pity for Winifred urged him on; remorse and horror held him back feebly. He knew not in his own soul how to act; he knew he was weak and wicked only.

As he paused and hesitated, unable to decide for good or evil—a noise at the door made him start and waver.—Somebody coming! Perhaps Warren Relf. — That address on the envelope—“Miss Meysey, The Hall, Whitestrand, Suffolk.”—If Relf saw it, he would know it was—well—an imitation of Elsie’s handwriting. She had sent a note to Relf on the morning of the sandhills picnic.

If any one else saw it, they would see at least it was a letter to his *fiancée*—and they would chaff him accordingly with chaff that he hated, or perhaps they would only smile a superior smile of fatuous recognition and smirking amusement. He could stand neither—above all, not Relf.—His fingers relaxed upon the cover of the envelope.—Half unconsciously, half unwillingly, he loosened his hold.—Plop! it fell through that yawning abyss, three inches down, but as deep as perdition itself.—The die was cast! A liar for a lifetime!

He turned round, and Hatherley the journalist stood smiling good-morning by the open doorway. Hugh Massinger tried his hardest to look as if nothing out of the common had happened in any way. He nodded to Hatherley, and buried his face once more in the pages of the *Times*. “The Drought in Wales”—“The Bulgarian Difficulty”—“Painful Disturbances on the West Coast of Africa.”—Pah! What nonsense! What commonplaces of opinion! It made his gorge rise with disgust to look at them. Wales and Bulgaria and the West Coast of

Africa, when Elsie was dead ! dead and unnoticed !

A boy in buttons brought in a telegram—Central News Agency—and fixed it by the corners with brass-headed pins in a vacant space on the accustomed notice-board. Hatherley, laying down his copy of *Punch*, strolled lazily over to the board to examine it. “Meysey ! Meysey !” he repeated musingly —“Why, Massinger, that must be one of your Whitestrand Meyseys. Precious uncommon name. There can’t be many of them.”

Hugh rose and glanced at the new telegram unconcernedly. It couldn’t have much to do with himself ! But its terms brought the blood with a hasty rush into his pale cheek again : “*Serious Accident on the Scotch Moors.* — Aberdeen, Thursday. As Sir Malcolm Farquharson’s party were shooting over the Glenbeg estate yesterday, near Kincardine-O’Neil, a rifle held by Mr. Wyville Meysey burst suddenly, wounding the unfortunate gentleman in the face and neck, and lodging a splinter of jagged metal in his left temple. He was conveyed at once from

the spot in an insensible state to Invertanar Castle, where he now lies in a most precarious condition. His wife and daughter were immediately telegraphed for."

"INVERTANAR: 10.40 A.M. Mr. Wyville Meysey, a guest of Sir Malcolm Farquharson's at Invertanar Castle, wounded yesterday by the bursting of his rifle on the Glenbeg moors, expired this morning very suddenly at 9.20. The unfortunate gentleman did not recover consciousness for a single moment after the fatal accident."

A shudder of horror ran through Hugh's frame as he realized the meaning of that curt announcement. Not for the mishap; not for Mrs. Meysey; not for Winifred: oh, dear no; but for his own possible or probable discomfiture.—His first thought was a characteristic one. Mr. Meysey had died unexpectedly. There might or there might not be a will forthcoming. Guardians might or might not be appointed for his infant daughter. The estate might or might not go to Winifred. He might or he might not now be permitted to marry her.—If she happened to be left a ward in Chancery, for

example, it would be a hopeless business : his chance would be ruined. The court would never consent to accept him as Winifred's husband. And then—and then it would be all up with him.

It was bad enough to have sold his own soul for a mess of pottage—for a few hundred acres of miserable salt marsh, encroached upon by the sea with rapid strides, and half covered with shifting, drifting sandhills. It was bad enough to have sacrificed Elsie—dear, tender, delicate, loving-hearted Elsie, his own beautiful, sacred, dead Elsie—to that wretched, sordid, ineffective avarice, that fractional worship of a silver-gilt Mammon. He had regretted all that in sack-cloth and ashes for one whole endless hopeless fortnight or more, already.—But to have sold his own soul and to have sacrificed Elsie for the privilege of being rejected by Winifred's guardian—for the chance of being publicly and ignominiously jilted by the Court of Chancery—for the opportunity of becoming a common laughing-stock to the quidnuncs of Cheyne Row and the five o'clock tea-tables of half feminine London—that was indeed a depth of possible

degradation from which his heart shrank with infinite throes of self-commiserating reluctance. He could sell his own soul for very little, and despise himself well for the squalid ignoble bargain ; but to sell his own soul for absolutely nothing, with a dose of well-deserved ridicule thrown in gratis, and no Elsie to console him for his bitter loss, was more than even Hugh Massinger's sense of mean self-abnegation could easily swallow.

He flung himself back unmanned, in the big leather-covered armchair, and let the abject misery of his own thoughts overcome him visibly in his rueful countenance.

"I never imagined," said Hatherley afterwards to his friends the Relfs, "that Massinger could possibly have felt anything so much as he seemed to feel the sudden death of his prospective father-in-law, when he read that telegram. It really made me think better of the fellow."

CHAPTER XXI.

CLEARING THE DECKS.

WARREN RELF had arranged for his mother and sister, with Elsie Challoner, to seek the friendly shelter of San Remo early in October. The sooner away from England the better. Before they went, however, to avert the chance of a disagreeable encounter, he met them on their arrival in town at Liverpool Street, and saw them safely across to the continental train at London Bridge. It chanced to be the very self-same day that Hugh Massinger had posted his second forged note to poor fatherless Winifred.

Elsie dared hardly look the young painter in the face even now, for shame and timidity ; and Warren Relf, respecting her natural sensitiveness, concentrated most of his attention on his mother and Edie, scarcely allowing

Elsie to notice by shy side-glances his unobtrusive preparations for her own personal comfort on the journey. But Elsie's quick eye observed them all, gratefully, none the less for that. She liked Warren: it was impossible for anybody not to like and respect the frank young painter, with his honest bronzed face, and his open, manly, out-spoken manners. Timid as she was and broken-hearted still, she could not go away from England for ever and ever—for Elsie never meant to return again—without thanking him just once in a few short words for all his kindness. As they stood on the bare and windy platform with which the South-Eastern Railway Company woos our suffrages at London Bridge, she drew him aside for a moment from his mother and sister with a little hasty shrinking glance which Warren could not choose but follow. "Mr. Relf," she said, looking down at the floor and fumbling with her parasol, "I want to thank you; I can't go away without thanking you once." He saw the effort it had cost her to say so much, and a wild lump rose sudden in his throat for gratitude and pleasure.

“Miss Challoner,” he answered, looking back at her with an unmistakable light in his earnest eyes, “say nothing else. I am more than sufficiently thanked already.—I have only one thing to say to you now. I know you wish this episode kept secret from every one: you may rely upon me and upon my mate in the yawl. If ever in my life I can be of any service to you, remember you can command me.—If not, I shall never again obtrude myself upon your memory.—Good-bye, good-bye.” And taking her hand one moment in his own, he held it for a second, then let it drop again. “Now go,” he said in a tremulous voice—“go back to Edie.”

Elsie—one blush—went back as he bade her. “Good-bye,” she said, as she glided from his side—“good-bye, and thank you.” That was all that passed between those two that day. Yet Elsie knew, with profound regret, as the train steamed off through the draughty corridors on its way to Dover, that Warren Relf had fallen in love with her; and Warren Relf, standing alone upon the dingy, gusty platform, knew with an ecstasy of delight and joy that Elsie Challoner was

grateful to him and liked him. It is something, gratitude. He valued that more from Elsie Challoner than he would have valued love from any other woman.

With profound regret, for her part, Elsie saw that Warren Relf had fallen in love with her ; because he was such an honest, manly, straightforward, good fellow, and because from the very first moment she had liked him. Yet what to her were love and lovers now ? Her heart lay buried beneath the roots of the poplar at Whitestrand, as truly as Hugh Massinger thought it lay buried in the cheap sea-washed grave in the sand at Orfordness. She was grieved to think this brave and earnest man should have fixed his heart on a hopeless object. It was well she was going to San Remo for ever. In the whirl and bustle and hurry of London life, Warren Relf would doubtless soon forget her. But some faces are not easily forgotten.

From London Bridge, Warren Relf took the Metropolitan to St. James's Park, and walked across, still flushed and hot, to Piccadilly. At the club, he glanced hastily at that morning's paper. The first paragraph

on which his eye lighted was Winifred Meysey's earnest advertisement in the Agony Column. It gave him no little food for reflection. If ever Elsie saw that advertisement, it might alter and upset all her plans for the future—and all his own plans into the bargain. Already she felt profoundly the pain and shame of her false position with Winifred and the Meyseys: that much Warren Relf had learned from Edie. If only she knew how eagerly Winifred pined for news of her, she might be tempted after all to break her reserve, to abandon her concealment, and to write full tidings of her present whereabouts to her poor little frightened and distressed pupil. That would be bad; for then the whole truth must sooner or later come out before the world; and for Elsie's sake, for Winifred's sake, perhaps even a wee bit for his own sake also, Warren Relf shrank unspeakably from that unhappy exposure. He couldn't bear to think that Elsie's poor broken bleeding heart should be laid open to its profoundest recesses before the eyes of society, for every daw of an envious old dowager to snap and peck at. He hoped

Elsie would not see the advertisement. If she did, he feared her natural tenderness and her sense of self-respect would compel her to write the whole truth to Winifred.

She might see it at Marseilles, for they were going to run right through to the Mediterranean by the special express, stopping a night to rest themselves at the Hôtel du Louvre in the Rue Cannebière. Edie would be sure to look at the *Times*, and if she saw the advertisement, to show it to Elsie.

But even if she didn't, ought he not himself to call her attention to it? Was it right of him, having seen it, not to tell her of it? Should he not rather leave to Elsie herself the decision what course she thought best to take under these special circumstances?

He shrank from doing it. It grieved him to the quick to strain her poor broken heart any further. She had suffered so much: why rake it all up again? And even as he thought all these things, he knew each moment with profounder certainty than ever that he loved Elsie. There is nothing on earth to excite a man's love for a beautiful

woman like being compelled to take tender care for that woman's happiness—having a gentle solicitude for her most sacred feelings thrust upon one by circumstances as an absolute necessity.—Still, Warren Relf was above all things honest and trustworthy. Not to send that advertisement straight to Elsie, even at the risk of hurting her own feelings, would constitute in some sort, he felt, a breach of confidence, a constructive falsehood, or at the very best a *suppressio veri*; and Warren Relf was too utterly and transparently truthful to allow for a moment any paltering with essential verities.—He sighed a sigh of profound regret as he took his penknife with lingering hesitation from his waistcoat pocket. But he boldly cut out the advertisement from the Agony Column, none the less, thereby defacing the first page of the *Times*, and rendering himself liable to the censure of the committee for wanton injury to the club property; after the perpetration of which heinous offence he walked gravely and soberly into the adjoining writing-room and sat down to indite a hasty note intended for his sister at the Hôtel du Louvre:—

“MY DEAR EDIE,

“Just after you left, I caught sight of enclosed advertisement in the second column of this morning’s *Times*. Show it to Her. I can’t bear to send it—I can’t bear to cause her any further trouble or embarrassment of any sort after all she has suffered; and yet—it would be wrong, I feel, to conceal it from her. If she takes my advice, she will *not* answer it. Better let things remain as they are. To write one line would be to upset all. For heaven’s sake, don’t show Her this letter.—With love to you both and kind regards to Her,

“Your affectionate brother,

“W. R.”

He addressed the letter, “Miss Relf, Hôtel du Louvre, Marseilles,” and went over with it to the box on the mantel-shelf, where Hugh Massinger’s letter was already lying.

When Edie Relf received that letter next evening at the hotel in the Rue Cannebière, she looked at it once and glanced over at Elsie. She looked at it twice and glanced over at Elsie. She looked at it a third time

—and then, with a woman's sudden resolve, she did exactly what Warren himself had told her not to do—she handed it across the table to Elsie.

Hugh's plot trembled indeed in the balance that moment; for if only Elsie wrote to Winifred, ignoring of course his last forged letter, then lying on the hall table at White-strand, all would have been up with him. His lie would have come home to him straight as a lie. The two letters would in all probability not have coincided. Winifred would have known him from that day forth for just what he was—a liar—and a forger.

And yet if, by that simple and natural coincidence, Elsie had sent a letter from Marseilles merely assuring Winifred of her safety and answering the advertisement, it would have fallen in completely with Hugh's plot, and rendered Winifred's assurance doubly certain. Elsie had sailed to Australia by way of Marseilles, then. In a novel, that coincidence would surely have occurred. In real life, it might easily have done so, but as a matter of fact it didn't; for Elsie read the letter slowly first, and then the advertisement.

“Poor fellow!” she said as she passed the letter back again to Edie. “It was very kind of him; and he did quite right.—I think I shall take his advice, after all.—It’s terribly difficult to know what one ought to do. But I don’t think I shall write to Winifred.”

Not for herself. She could bear the exposure, if it was to save Winifred. But for Winifred’s sake, for poor dear Winifred’s. She couldn’t deprive her of her new lover.

Ought she to let Winifred marry him? What trouble might not yet be in store for Winifred?—No, no. Hugh would surely be kinder to *her*. He had sacrificed one loving heart for her sake; he was not likely now to break another.

How little we all can judge for the best. It would have been better for Elsie and better for Winifred, if Elsie had done as Warren Relf did, and not as he said—if she had written the truth, and the whole truth at once to Winifred, allowing her to be her own judge in the matter. But Elsie had not the heart to crush Winifred’s dream; and very naturally. No one can blame a woman

for refusing to act with more than human devotion and foresight.

Hugh Massinger had left the headquarters of Bohemia for twenty minutes at the exact moment when Warren Relf entered the Cheyne Row Club. He had gone to telegraph his respectful condolences to Winifred and Mrs. Meysey at Invertanar Castle, on their sad loss, with conventional politeness. When he came back, he found, to his surprise, the copy of the *Times* still lying open on the smoking-room table; but Winifred's advertisement was cut clean out of the Agony Column with a sharp penknife. In a moment he said to himself, aghast: "Some enemy hath done this thing." It must have been Relf! Nobody else in the club knew anything. Such espionage was intolerable, unendurable, not to be permitted. For three days he had been trembling and chafing at the horrid fact that Relf knew all and might denounce and ruin him. That alone was bad enough. But that Relf should be plotting and intriguing against him! That Relf should use his sinister knowledge for some evil end! That Relf should go spying and

eavesdropping and squirming about like a common detective! The idea was fairly past endurance. Among gentlemen such things were not to be permitted. Hugh Massinger was prepared not to permit them.

He passed a day and night of inexpressible annoyance. This situation was getting too much for him. He was fighting in the dark: he didn't understand Warren Relf's silence. If the fellow meant to crush him, for what was he waiting? Hugh could not hold all the threads in his mind together. He felt as though Warren Relf was going to make, not only the Cheyne Row Club, but all London altogether too hot for him. To have drowned Elsie, to be jilted by Winifred, and to be baffled after all by that creature Relf—this, this was the hideous and ignominious future he saw looming now visibly before him!

It was with a heavy heart that next evening at seven he dropped into the club dining-room. Would Relf be there? he wondered silently. And if so, what course would Relf adopt towards him? Yes, Relf *was* there, at a corner table, as good luck would have it,

with his back turned to him safely as he entered; and that fellow Potts, the other mudbank artist—they hung their wretched daubs of flat Suffolk seaboard side by side fraternally on the walls of the Institute—was dining with him and concocting mischief, no doubt, for the house of Massinger. Hugh half determined to turn and flee: then all that was manly and genuine within him revolted at once against that last disgrace. He would not run from this creature Relf. He would not be turned out of his own club—he was a member of the committee and a founder of the society. He would face it out and dine in spite of him.

But not before the fellow's very eyes; that was more than in his present perturbed condition Hugh Massinger could manage to stand. He skulked quietly round, unseen by Relf, into the side alcove—a recess cut off by an arched doorway—where he gave his order in a very low voice to Martin, the obsequious waiter. Martin was surprised at so much reserve. Mr. Massinger, he was generally the very freest and loudest-spoken gentleman in the whole houseful of 'em. He always

talked, he did, as if the club and the kitchen and the servants all belonged to him.

From the alcove, by a special interposition of fate, Hugh could hear distinctly what Relf was saying. Strange—incredible—a singular stroke of luck: he had indeed caught the man in the very act and moment of conspiring.—They were talking of Elsie! Their conversation came to him distinct, though low. Unnatural excitement had quickened his senses to a strange degree. He heard it all—every sound—every syllable.

“Then you promise, Frank, on your word of honour as a gentleman, you’ll never breathe a word of this or of any part of Miss Challoner’s affair to anybody anywhere?”

“My dear boy, I promise, that’s enough.—I see the necessity as well as you do.—So you’ve actually got the letter, have you?”

“I’ve got the letter. If you like, I’ll read it to you. It’s here in my pocket. I have to restore it by the time Mr. Meysey returns to-morrow.”

Mr. Meysey! Restore it! Then, for all his plotting, Relf didn’t know that Mr. Meysey was dead, and that his funeral was

fixed to take place at Whitestrand on Monday or Tuesday!

There was a short pause. *What* letter? he wondered. Then Relf began reading in a low tone: "My darling Winifred, I can hardly make up my mind to write you this letter; and yet I must: I can no longer avoid it."

Great heavens, it was his own forged letter to Winifred! How on earth had it ever come into Relf's possession?

Plot, plot—plot and counterplot! Dirty, underhand, hole-and-corner spy-business! Relf had wheedled it out of the Meyseys somehow, to help him to track down and confront his enemy! Or else he had suborned one of the Whitestrand servants to steal or copy their Master's correspondence!

He heard it through to the last word, "Ever your affectionate but heart-broken
ELSIE."

What were they going to say next?—Nothing. Potts just drew a long breath of surprise, and then whistled shortly and curiously. "The man's a blackguard, to have broken the poor girl's heart," he observed at last, "let alone this. He's a blackguard,

Relf.—I'm very sorry for her.—And what's become of Miss Challoner now, if it isn't indiscreet to ask the question?"

"Well, Potts, I've only taken any other man into my confidence at all in this matter, because you knew more than half already, and it was impossible, without telling you the other half, fully to make you feel the necessity for keeping the strictest silence about it. I'd rather not tell either you or anybody exactly where Miss Challoner's gone now. But at the present moment, if you want to know the precise truth, I've no doubt she's at Marseilles, on her way abroad to a further destination which I prefer on her account not to mention. More than that it's better not to say. But she wishes it kept a profound secret, and she intends never to return to England."

As Hugh Massinger heard those words, those reassuring words, a sudden sense of freedom and lightness burst instantly over him in a wild rush of reaction. Aha! aha! poor feeble enemy! Was this all? Then Relf knew really nothing! That mysterious "Yes" of his was a fraud, a pretence, a mis-

take, a delusion! He was all wrong, all wrong and in error. Instead of knowing that Elsie was dead—dead and buried in her nameless grave at Orfordness—he fancied she was still alive and in hiding! The man was a wind-bag. To think he should have been terrified—he, Hugh Massinger—by such a mere empty boastful eavesdropper!—Why, Relf, after all, was himself deceived by the forged letters he had so cleverly palmed off upon them. The special information he pretended to possess was only the special information derived from Hugh Massinger's own careful and admirable forgeries. He hugged himself in a perfect transport of delight. The load was lifted as if by magic from his breast. There was nothing on earth for him, after all, to be afraid of!

He saw it all at a glance now.—Relf was in league with the servants at the Meyseys'. Some prying lady's-maid or dishonest flunkey must have sent him the first letter to Winifred, or at least a copy of it: nay, more; he or she must have intercepted the second one, which arrived while Winifred was on her way to Scotland—else how could

Relf have heard this last newly fledged fiction about the journey abroad—the stoppage at Marseilles—the determination never to return to England?—And how greedily and eagerly the man swallowed it all—his nasty second-hand servants’-hall information! Hugh positively despised him in his own mind for his ready credulity and his mean duplicity. How glibly he retailed the plausible story, with nods and hints and additions of his own: “At the present moment, I’ve no doubt she’s at Marseilles, on her way abroad to a further destination which I prefer on her account not to mention.” What airs and graces and what comic importance the fellow put on, on the strength of his familiarity with this supposed mystery! Any other man with a straightforward mind would have said outright plainly, “to Australia;” but this pretentious jackanapes with his stolen information must make up a little mystification all of his own, to give himself importance in the eyes of his greedy gobe-mouche of a companion. It was too grotesque! too utterly ridiculous! And this was the man of whom he had been so afraid! His

own dupe! the ready fool who swallowed at second-hand such idle tattle of the servants' hall, and employed an understrapper or a pretty *soubrette* to open other people's letters for his own information! From that moment forth, Hugh might cordially hate him, Hugh might freely despise him; but he would never, never, never be afraid of him.

One only idea left some slight suspicion of uneasiness on his enlightened mind. He hoped the lady's-maid—that hypothetical lady's-maid—had sent on the forged letter—after reading it—to Winifred. Not that poor Winifred would have time to think much about Elsie at present, in the midst of this sudden and unexpected bereavement: she would be too full of her own dead father, no doubt, to pay any great attention to her governess's misfortunes. But still, one doesn't like one's private letters to be so vulgarly tampered with. And the worst of it was, he could hardly ask her whether she had received the note or not. He could hardly get at the bottom of this low conspiracy. It was his policy now to let sleeping dogs lie. The less said about Elsie the better.

Yet in his heart he despised Warren Relf for his meanness. He might forge himself: nothing low or ungentlemanly or degrading in forgery. Dishonest, if you like; dishonest, not vulgar. But to open other people's letters—pah!—the disgusting smallness and lowness and vulgarity of it! A sort of under-footmanish type of criminality. *Pecca fortiter*, if you will, of course, but don't be a cad and a disgrace to your breeding.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOLY MATRIMONY.

THE way of the transgressor went easy for a while with Hugh Massinger. His sands ran smoother than he could himself have expected. His two chief bugbears faded away by degrees before the strong light of facts into pure nonentity. Relf did *not* know that Elsie Challoner lay dead and buried in a lonely grave at Orfordness; and Winifred Meysey was *not* left a ward in Chancery, or otherwise inconvenienced and strictly tied up in her plans for marrying him. On the contrary, the affairs of the deceased were arranged exactly as Hugh himself would have wished them to be ordered. The will in particular was a perfect gem: Hugh could have thrown his arms round the blameless attorney who drew it up: Mrs. Meysey appointed sole

executrix and guardian of the infant; the estate and Hall bequeathed absolutely and without remainder to Winifred in person; a life-interest in certain specified sums only, as arranged by settlement, to the relict herself; and the coast all clear for Hugh Massinger. Everything indeed had turned out for the best. The late Squire had chosen the happiest possible moment for dying. The infant and the guardian were on Hugh's own side. There need be no long engagement, no tremulous expectation of dead men's shoes now: nor would Hugh have to put up for an indefinite term of years with the nuisance of a father-in-law's perpetual benevolent interference and well-meant dictation. Even the settlements, those tough documents, would be all drawn up to suit his own digestion. As Hugh sat, decorously lugubrious, in the dining-room at Whitestrand with Mr. Heberden, the family solicitor, two days after the funeral, he could hardly help experiencing a certain subdued sense of something exceedingly akin to stifled gratitude in his own soul towards that defective breech-loader which had relieved him at once of so

many embarrassments, and made him practically Lord of the Manor of Consumptum per Mare, in the hundred of Dunwich and county of Suffolk, containing by admeasurement so many acres, roods, and perches, be the same more or less—and mostly less, indeed, as the years proceeded.

But for that slight drawback, Hugh cared as yet absolutely nothing. One only trouble, one visible kill-joy, darkened his view from the Hall windows. Every principal room in the house faced due south. Wherever he looked, from the drawing-room or the dining-room, the library or the vestibule, the boudoir or the billiard-room, the Whitestrand poplar rose straight and sheer, as conspicuous as ever, by the brink of the Char, where sea and stream met together on debatable ground in angry encounter. Its rugged boles formed the one striking and beautiful object in the whole prospect across those desolate flats of sand and salt marsh, but to Hugh Massinger that ancient tree had now become instinct with awe and horror—a visible memorial of his own crime—for it *was* a crime—and of poor dead Elsie in her name-

less grave by the Low Lighthouse. He grew to regard it as Elsie's monument. Day after day, while he stopped at Whitestrand, he rose up in the morning with aching brows from his sleepless bed—for how could he sleep, with the breakers that drowned and tossed ashore his dear dead Elsie thundering wild songs of triumph from the bar in his ears?—and gazed out of his window over the dreary outlook, to see that accusing tree with its gnarled roots confronting him ever, full in face, and poisoning his success with its mute witness to his murdered victim. Every time he looked out upon it, he heard once more that wild, wild cry, as of a stricken life, when Elsie plunged into the careering current. Every time the wind shrieked through its creaking branches in the lonely night, the shrieks went to his heart like so many living human voices crying for sympathy. He hated and despised himself in the very midst of his success. He had sold his own soul for a wasted strip of swamp and marsh and brake and sandhill, and he found in the end that it profited him nothing.

Still, time brings alleviation to most earthly

troubles. Even remorse grows duller with age—till the day comes for it to burst out afresh in fuller force than ever and goad its victim on to a final confession. Days and weeks and months rolled by, and Hugh Massinger by slow degrees began to feel that Othello was himself again. He wrote, as of old, his brilliant leaders every day regularly for the *Morning Telephone*: he slashed three-volume novels with as much vigour as ever, and rather more cynicism and cruelty than before, in the *Monday Register*: he touched the tender stops of various quills, warbling his Doric lay to Ballade and Sonnet, in the wonted woods of the *Pimlico Magazine* with endless versatility. Nor was that all. He played high in the evening at Pallavicini's, more recklessly even than had been his ancient use; for was not his future now assured to him? and did not the horrid picture of his dead drowned Elsie, tossed friendless on the bare beach at Orfordness, haunt him and sting him with its perpetual presence to seek in the feverish excitement of roulette some momentary forgetfulness of his life's tragedy? True, his rhymes were sadder

and gloomier now than of old, and his play wilder : no more of the rollicking, humorous, happy-go-lucky ballad-mongering that alternated in the " Echoes from Callimachus " with his more serious verses : his sincerest laughter, he knew himself, with some pain was fraught, since Elsie left him. But in their lieu had come a reckless abandonment that served very well at first sight instead of real mirth or heart-felt geniality. In the old days, Hugh had always cultivated a certain casual vein of cheerful pessimism : he had posed as the man who drags the lengthening chain of life behind him good-humouredly : now, a grim sardonic smile usurped the place of his pessimistic *bonhomie*, and filled his pages with a Carlylese gloom that was utterly alien to his true inborn nature. Even his lighter work showed traces of the change. His wayward article, " Is Death Worth Dying ? " in the *Nineteenth Century*, was full of bitterness ; and his clever skit on the Blood-and-Thunder school of fiction, entitled " The Zululiad," and published as a Christmas " shilling shocker," had a sting and a venom in it that were wholly wanting to his earlier

performances in the same direction. The critics said Massinger was suffering from a shallow spasm of Byronic affectation. He knew himself he was really suffering from a profound fit of utter self-contempt and wild despairing carelessness of consequence.

The world moves, however, as Galileo remarked, in spite of our sorrows. Three months after Wyville Meysey's death, White-strand received its new master. It was strange to find any but Meyseys at the Hall, for Meyseys had dwelt there from time immemorial; the first of the bankers, even, though of a younger branch, having purchased the estate with his newly-gotten gold from an elder and ruined representative of the main stock. The wedding was a very quiet affair, of course: half-mourning at best, with no show or tomfoolery; and what was of much more importance to Hugh, the arrangements for the settlements were most satisfactory. The family solicitor wasn't such a fool as to make things unpleasant for his new client. Winifred was a nice little body in her way, too; affectionately proud of her captive poet: and from a lordly height of

marital superiority, Hugh rather liked the pink and white small woman than otherwise. But he didn't mean to live much at White-strand either—"At least while your mother lasts, my child," he said cautiously to Winifred, letting her down gently by gradual stages, and saving his own reputation for kindly consideration at the same moment. "The good old soul would naturally like still to feel herself mistress in her own house. It would be cruelty to mothers-in-law to disturb her now. Whenever we come down, we'll come down strictly on a visit to her. But for ourselves, we'll nest for the present in London."

Nesting in London suited Winifred, for her part, excellently well. In poor papa's day, indeed, the Meyseys had felt themselves of late far too deeply impoverished—since the sandhills swallowed up the Yondstream farms—even to go up to town in a hired house for a few weeks or so in the height of the season, as they had once been wont to do, during the golden age of the agricultural interest. The struggle to keep up appearances in the old home on a reduced income had occupied to the full their utmost energies

during these latter days of universal depression. So London was to Winifred a practically almost unknown world, rich in potentialities of varied enjoyment. She had been there but seldom, on a visit to friends; and she knew nothing as yet of that brilliant circle that gathers round Mrs. Bouverie Barton's Wednesday evenings, where Hugh Massinger was able to introduce her with distinction and credit. True, the young couple began life on a small scale, in a quiet little house—most æsthetically decorated on economical principles—down a side-street in the remote recesses of Philistine Bayswater. But Hugh's coterie, though unsuccessful, was nevertheless *ex officio* distinguished: he was hand-in-glove with the whole Cheyne Row set—the Royal Academicians still in embryo; the Bishops Designate of fate who at present held suburban curacies; the Cabinet Ministers whose budget yet lingered in domestic arrears; the germinating judges whose chances of the ermine were confined in near perspective to soup at sessions, or the smallest of small devilling for rising juniors. They were not rich in this world's goods,

those discounted celebrities; but they were a lively crew, full of fun and fancy, and they delighted Winifred by their juvenile exuberance of wit and eloquence. She voted the men with their wives, when they had any—which wasn't often, for Bohemia can seldom afford the luxury of matrimony—the most charming society she had ever met; and Bohemia in return voted "little Mrs. Massinger," in the words of its accepted mouthpiece and spokesman, Hatherley, "as witty a piece of Eve's flesh as any in Illyria." The little "arrangement in pink and white" became, indeed, quite a noted personage in the narrow world of Cheyne Row society.

To say the truth, Hugh detested White-strand. He never wanted to go near the place again, now that he had made himself in very deed its lord and master. He hated the house, the grounds, the river; but above all he hated that funereal poplar, that seemed to rise up and menace him each time he looked at it with the pains and penalties of his own evil conscience. At Easter, Winifred dragged him home once more, to visit the relict in her lonely mansion. The Bard

went, as in duty bound ; but the duty was more than commonly distasteful. They reached Whitestrand late at night, and were shown upstairs at once into a large front bedroom. Hugh's heart leaped up in his mouth when he saw it. It was Elsie's room : the room into which he had climbed on that fateful evening ; the room bound closest up in his memory with the hideous abiding nightmare of his poisoned life ; the room he had never since dared to enter ; the room he had hoped never more to look upon.

“Are we to sleep here, Winnie?” he cried aghast, in a tone of the utmost horror and dismay. And Winifred, looking up at him in silent surprise, answered merely in an unconcerned voice : “Why, yes, my dear boy ; what's wrong with the room ? It's good enough. We're to sleep here, of course—certainly.”

He dared say no more. To remonstrate would be madness. Any reason he gave must seem inadequate. But he would sooner have slept on the bare ground by the riverside than have slept that night in that desecrated and haunted room of Elsie's.

He did *not* sleep. He lay awake all the long hours through, and murmured to himself, ten thousand times over, "Elsie, Elsie, Elsie, Elsie!" His lips moved as he murmured sometimes. Winifred opened her eyes once—he felt her open them, though it was as dark as pitch—and seemed to listen. One's senses grow preternaturally sharp in the night watches. Could she have heard that mute movement of his silent lips? He hoped not. Oh no; it was impossible. But he lay awake till morning in a deadly terror, the cold sweat standing in big drops on his brow, haunted through the long vigils of the dreary night by that picture of Elsie, in her pale white dress, with arms uplifted above her helpless head, flinging herself wildly from the dim black poplar, through the gloom of evening, upon the tender mercies of the swift dark water.

Elsie, Elsie, Elsie, Elsie! It was for this he had sold and betrayed his Elsie!

In the morning when he rose, he went over to the window—Elsie's window, round whose sides the rich wistaria clambered so luxuriantly—and looked out with weary

sleepless eyes across the weary dreary stretch of barren Suffolk scenery. It was still winter, and the wistaria on the wall stood bald and naked and bare of foliage. How different from the time when Elsie lived there! He could see where the bough had broken with his weight that awful night of Elsie's disappearance. He gazed vacantly across the lawn and meadow towards the tumbling sandhills. "Winifred," he said—he was in no mood just then to call her Winnie—"what a big bare bundle of straight tall switches that poplar is! So gaunt and stiff! I hate the very sight of it. It's a great disfigurement. I wonder your people ever stood it so long, blocking out the view from their drawing-room windows."

Winifred rose from the dressing-table and looked out by his side in blank surprise. "Why, Hugh," she cried, noting both his unwonted tone and the absence of the now customary pet form of her name, "how *can* you say so? I call it just lovely. Blocking out the view, indeed! Why, it *is* the view. There's nothing else. It's the only good point in the whole picture. I love to see it

even in winter—the dear old poplar—so tall and straight—with its twigs etched out in black and gray against the sky like that. I love it better than anything else at Whitestrand.”

Hugh drummed his fingers on the frosted pane impatiently. “For my part, I hate it,” he answered in a short but sullen tone. “Whenever I come to live at Whitestrand, I shall never rest till I’ve cut it down and stubbed it up from the roots entirely.”

“Hugh!”

There was something in the accent that made him start. He knew why. It reminded him of Elsie’s voice as she cried aloud “Hugh!” in her horror and agony upon that fatal evening by the grim old poplar.

“Well, Winnie,” he answered much more tenderly. The tone had melted him.

Winifred flung her arms around him with every sign of grief and dismay and burst into a sudden flood of tears. “Oh, Hugh,” she cried, “you don’t know what you say: you can’t think how you grieve me.—Don’t you know why? You must surely guess it.—It isn’t that the Whitestrand poplar’s a famous

tree—a seamark for sailors—a landmark for all the country round—historical almost, not to say celebrated! It isn't that it was mentioned by Fuller and Drayton, and I'm sure I don't know how many other famous people—poor papa knew, and was fond of quoting them. It's not for all that, though for that alone I should be sorry to lose it, sorrier than for anything else in all Whitestrand. But, oh, Hugh, that *you* should say so! That *you* should say, 'For my part, I hate it.'—Why, Hugh, it was on the roots of that very tree, you know, that you saw me for the very first time in my life, as I sat there dangling my hat—with Elsie. It was from the roots of that tree that I first saw you and fell in love with you, when you jumped off Mr. Relf's yawl to rescue my poor little half-crown hat for me.—It was there you first won my heart—you won my heart—my poor little heart.—And to think you really want to cut down that tree would nearly, very nearly break it.—Hugh, dear Hugh, never, never, never say so!"

No man can see a woman cry unmoved. To do so is more or less than human. Hugh

laid her head tenderly on his big shoulder, soothed and kissed her with loving gentleness, swore he was speaking without due thought or reflection, declared that he loved that tree every bit as much in his heart as she herself did, and pacified her gradually by every means in his large repertory of masculine blandishments. But deep down in his bosom, he crushed his despair. If ever he came to live at Whitestrand, then, that hateful tree must for ever rise up in mute accusation to bear witness against him !

It could not ! It should not ! He could never stand it. Either they must never live at Whitestrand at all, or else—or else, in some way unknown to Winifred, he must manage to do away with the Whitestrand poplar.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNDER THE PALM-TREES.

A LONE governess, even though she be a Girton girl, vanishes readily into space from the stage of society. It's wonderful how very little she's missed. She comes and goes and disappears into vacancy, almost as the cook and the housemaid do in our modern domestic phantasmagoria; and after a few months, everybody ceases even to inquire what has become of her. Our round horizon knows her no more. If ever at rare intervals she happens to flit for a moment across our zenith again, it is but as a *revenant* from some distant sphere. She has played her part in life, so far as we are concerned, when she has "finished the education" of our growing girls, as we cheerfully phrase it—what a happy idea that anybody's education could

ever be finished!—and we let her drop out altogether from our scheme of things accordingly, or feel her, when she invades our orbit once more, as inconvenient as all other *revenants* proverbially find themselves. Hence, it was no great wonder indeed that Elsie Challoner should subside quietly into the peaceful routine of her new existence at the Villa Rossa at San Remo, with “no questions asked,” as the advertisements frankly and ingenuously word it. She had a few girlfriends in England—old Girton companions—who tracked her still on her path through the cosmos, and to these she wrote unreservedly as to her present whereabouts. She didn’t enter into details, of course, about the particular way she came to leave her last temporary home at the Meyseys’ at White-strand: no one is bound to speak out everything; but she said in plain and simple language she had accepted a new and she hoped more permanent engagement on the Riviera. That was all. She concealed nothing and added nothing. Her mild deception was purely negative. She had no wish to hide the fact of her being alive from

anybody on earth but Hugh and Winifred ; and even from them, she desired to hide it by passive rather than by active concealment.

But it is an error of youth to underestimate in the long run the interosculation of society in our modern Babylon. You may lurk and languish and lie obscure for a while ; but you do not permanently evade anybody : you may suffer eclipse, but you cannot be extinguished. While we are young and foolish, we often think to ourselves, on some change in our environment, that Jones or Brown has now dropped entirely out of our private little universe—that we may safely count upon never again happening upon him or hearing of him anyhow or anywhere. We tell Smith something we know or suspect about Miss Robinson, under the profound but, alas, too innocent conviction that they two revolve in totally different planes of life, and can never conceivably collide against one another. We leave Mauritius or Eagle City, Nebraska, and imagine we are quit for good and all of the insignificant Mauritians or the free-born, free-mannered, and free-spoken citizens of that far western mining camp.

Error, error, sheer juvenile error! As comets come back in time from the abysses of space, so everybody always turns up everywhere. Jones and Brown run up against us incontinently on the King's Road at Brighton; or occupy the next table to our own at Delmonico's; or clap us on the shoulder as we sit with a blanket wrapped round our shivering forms, intent upon the too wintry sunrise on the summit of the Rigi. Miss Robinson's plane bisects Smith's horizon at right angles in a *dahabeeyah* on the Upper Nile, or discovers our treachery at an hotel at Orotava in the Canary Islands. Our Mauritian sugar-planter calls us over the coals for our pernicious views on differential duties and the French bounty system among the stormy channels of the Outer Hebrides; and Colonel Bill Manningham, of the *Eagle City National Banner*, intrudes upon the quiet of our suburban villa at remote Surbiton to inquire, with Western American picturesqueness and exuberance of vocabulary, what the Hades we meant by our casual description of Nebraskan society as a den of thieves, in the last number of the St. Petersburg *Monitor*? Oh no; in

the pre-Columban days of Boadicea, and Romulus and Remus, and the Twenty-first Dynasty, it might perhaps have been possible to mention a fact at Nineveh or Pekin with tolerable security against its being repeated forthwith in the palaces of Mexico or the huts of Honolulu; but in our existing world of railways and telegraphs and penny postage, and the great ubiquitous special correspondent, when Morse and Wheatstone have wreaked their worst, and whosoever enters Jerusalem by the Jaffa Gate sees a red-lettered notice-board staring him in the face, "This way to Cook's Excursion Office"—the attempt to conceal or hush up anything has become simply and purely a ridiculous fallacy. When we go to Timbuctoo, we expect to meet with some of our wife's relations in confidential quarters; and we are not surprised when the aged chief who entertains us in Parisian full dress at an eight o'clock dinner in the Fiji Islands relates to us some pleasing Oxford anecdotes of the missionary bishop whom in unregenerate days he assisted to eat, and under whom we ourselves read Aristotle and Tacitus as undergraduates at dear sleepy old

Oriel. More than ever nowadays is the proverb true, "*Quod tacitum velis nemini dixeris.*"

It was ordained, therefore, in the nature of things, that sooner or later Hugh Mas-singer must find out Elsie Challoner was really living. No star shoots ever beyond the limits of our galaxy. But the discovery might be postponed for an indefinite period; and besides, so far as Elsie herself was concerned, her only wish was to keep the fact secret from Hugh in person, not from the rest of the world at large; for she knew everybody else in her little sphere believed her merely to have left the Meyseys' in a most particular and unexplained hurry. Now, Hugh for his part, even if any vague rumour of her having been sighted here or there in some distant nook of the Riviera by So-and-so or What's-his-name might happen at any time to reach his ear, would certainly set it down in his own heart as one more proof of the signal success of his own clever and cunningly designed deception. As a matter of fact, more than one person did accidentally, in the course of conversation, during the next few

years mention to Hugh that somebody had said Miss Challoner had been seen at Marseilles or Cannes, or Genoa or somewhere; and Hugh in every case did really look upon it only as another instance of Warren Relf's blind acceptance of his bland little fictions. The more people thought Elsie was alive, the more did Hugh Massinger in his own heart pride himself inwardly on the cleverness and far-sightedness of the plot he had laid and carried out that awful evening at the Fisherman's Rest at Whitestrand in Suffolk.

Thus it happened that Elsie was not far wrong, for the present at least, in her calculation of chances as to Hugh and Winifred.

The very day Elsie reached San Remo, news of Mr. Meysey's death came to her in the papers. It was a sudden shock, and the temptation to write to Winifred then was very strong; but Elsie resisted it. She had to resist it—to crush down her sympathy for sympathy's sake. She couldn't bear to break poor Winifred's heart at such a moment by letting her know to the full all Hugh's baseness. It was hard indeed that Winifred should think her unfeeling, should call her

ungrateful, should suppose her forgetful ; but she bore even that—for Winifred's sake—without murmuring. Some day, perhaps, Winifred would know ; but she hoped not. For Winifred's sake, she hoped Winifred would never find out what manner of man she proposed to marry.

And for Hugh's too. For with feminine consistency and steadfastness of feeling, Elsie even now could not learn to hate him. Nay, rather, though she recognized how vile and despicable a thing he was, how poor in spirit, how unworthy of her love, she loved him still—she could not help loving him. For Hugh's sake, she wished it all kept secret for ever from Winifred, even though she herself must be the victim and the scapegoat. Winifred would think harshly of *her* in any case : why let her think harshly of Hugh also?

And so, in the little Villa Rossa at San Remo, among that calm reposeful scenery of olive groves and lemon orchards, Elsie's poor wounded heart began gradually to film over a little with external healing. She had the blessed deadening influence of daily routine to keep her from brooding : those six pleasant,

delicate, sensitive, sympathetic consumptive girls to teach and look after and walk out with perpetually. They were bright young girls, as often happens with their type; extremely like Winifred herself in manner—too like, Elsie sometimes thought in her own heart with a sigh of presentiment. And Elsie's heart was still young, too. They clambered together, like girls as they were, among the steep hills that stretch behind the town; they explored that pretty coquettish country; they wandered along the beautiful olive-clad shore; they made delightful excursions to the quaint old villages on the mountain sides—Taggia and Ceriana, and San Romolo and Perinaldo—mouldering gray houses perched upon pinnacles of mouldering gray rock, and pierced by arcades of Moorish gloom and mediæval solemnity. All alike helped Elsie to beat down the memory of her grief, or to hold it at bay in her poor tortured bosom. That she would ever be happy again was more than in her most sanguine moments she dared to expect; but she was not without hope that she might in time grow at least insensible.

One morning in December, at the Villa Rossa, about the hour for early breakfast, Elsie heard a light knock at her door. It was not the cook with the *café-au-lait* and roll and tiny pat of butter on the neat small tray for the first breakfast: Elsie knew that much by the lightness of the knock. "Come in," she said; and the door opened and Edie entered. She held a letter in her right hand, and a very grave look sat upon her usually merry face. "Somebody dead?" Elsie thought with a start. But no; the letter was not black-bordered. Edie opened it and drew from it slowly a small piece of paper, an advertisement from the *Times*. Then Elsie's breath came and went hard. She knew now what the letter portended. Not a death: not a death—but a marriage!

"Give it me, dear," she cried aloud to Edie. "Let me see it at once. I can bear it—I can bear it."

Edie handed the cutting to her, with a kiss on her forehead, and sat with her arm round Elsie's waist as the poor dazed girl, half erect in the bed, sat up and read that final seal of Hugh's cruel betrayal: "On Dec. 17th,

at Whitestrand parish Church, Suffolk, by the Rev. Percy W. Bickersteth, M.A., cousin of the bride, assisted by the Rev. J. Walpole, vicar, HUGH EDWARD DE CARTERET MASSINGER, of the Inner Temple, Barrister-at-law, to WINIFRED MARY, only daughter of the late Thomas Wyville Meysey of Whitestrand Hall, J.P.”

Elsie gazed at the cutting long and sadly ; then she murmured at last in a pained voice : “ And he thought I was dead ! He thought he had killed me ! ”

Eddie’s fiery indignation could restrain itself no longer. “ He’s a wicked man,” she cried : “ a wicked, bad, horrible creature ; and I don’t care what you say, Elsie ; I hope he’ll be punished as he well deserves for his cruelty and wickedness to you, darling.”

“ I hope not—I pray not,” Elsie answered solemnly. And as she said it, she meant it. She prayed for it profoundly.

After a while, she set down the paper on the table by her bedside, and laying her head on Eddie’s shoulder, burst into tears—a torrent of relief for her burdened feelings. Eddie soothed her and wept with her, tenderly.

For half an hour Elsie cried in silence ; then she rose at last, dried her eyes, burnt the little slip of paper from the *Times* resolutely, and said to Edie : " Now it's all over."

" All over ? " Edie echoed in an inquiring voice.

" Yes, darling, all over," Elsie answered very firmly. " I shall never, never cry any more at all about him. He's Winifred's now, and I hope he'll be good to her.—But, oh, Edie, I *did* once love him so ! "

And the winter wore away slowly at San Remo. Elsie had crushed down her love firmly in her heart now—crushed it down and stifled it to some real purpose. She knew Hugh for just what he was : she recognized his coldness, his cruelty, his little care for her ; and she saw no sign—as how should she see it?—of the deadly remorse that gnawed from time to time at his tortured bosom. The winter wore away, and Elsie was glad of it. Time was making her regret less poignant.

Early in February, Edie came up to her room one afternoon, when the six consumptive

pupils were at work in the schoolroom below with the old Italian music-master, under Mrs. Relf's direction, and seating herself, girl-fashion, on the bed, began to talk about her brother Warren.

Eddie seldom talked of Warren to Elsie: she had even ostentatiously avoided the subject hitherto, for reasons of her own which will be instantly obvious to the meanest intelligence. But now, by a sort of accident of design, she mentioned casually something about how he had always taken them, most years, for so many nice trips in his yawl to the lovely places on the coast about Bordighera and Mentone, and even Monte Carlo.

"Then he sometimes comes to the Riviera with you, does he?" Elsie asked listlessly. She loved Eddie and dear old Mrs. Relf, and she was grateful to Warren for his chivalrous kindness; but she could hardly pretend to feel profoundly interested in him. There had never been more than one man in the world for her, and that man was now Winifred's husband.

"He always comes," Eddie answered, with a significant stress on the word *always*.

"Indeed, this is the very first year he's ever missed coming since we first wintered here. He likes to be near us while we're on the coast. It gives him a chance of varying his subjects. He says himself, he's always inclined to judge of genius by its power of breaking out in a fresh place—not always repeating its own successes. In summer he sketches round the mouth of the Thames and the North Sea, but in winter he always alters the venue to the Mediterranean. Variety's good for a painter, he thinks: though, to be sure, that doesn't really matter very much to *him*, because nobody ever by any chance buys his pictures."

"Can't he sell them, then?" Elsie asked more curiously.

"My dear, Warren's a born artist, not a picture-dealer; therefore, of course, he never sells anything. If he were a mere dauber, now, there might be some chance for him. Being a real painter, he paints, naturally enough, but he makes no money."

"But the real painter always succeeds in the end, doesn't he?"

"In the end, yes; I don't doubt that:

within a century or two. But what's the good of succeeding, pray, a hundred years after you're dead and buried? The bankers won't discount a posthumous celebrity for you. I should like to succeed while I was alive to enjoy it. I'd rather have a modest competence in the nineteenth century than the principal niche in the Temple of Fame in the middle of the twentieth. Besides, Warren doesn't want to succeed at all, dear boy—at least, not much. I wish to goodness he did. He only wants to paint really great pictures.”

“That's the same thing, isn't it?—or very nearly.”

“Not a bit of it. Quite the contrary in some cases. Warren's one of them. He'll never succeed while he lives, poor child, unless his amiable sister succeeds in making him. And that's just what I mean to do in time, too, dear.—I mean to make Warren earn enough to keep himself—and a wife and family.”

Elsie looked down at the carpet uneasily. It wanted darning. “Why didn't he come this winter as usual?” she asked in haste, to turn the current of the conversation.

“Why? Well, why? What a question to ask!—Just because *you* were here, Elsie.”

Elsie examined the holes in the Persian pattern on the floor by her side with minuter care and precision than ever. “That was very kind of him,” she said after a pause, defining one of them with the point of her shoe accurately.

“Too kind,” Edie echoed—“too kind, and too sensitive.”

“I think not,” Elsie murmured low. She was blushing visibly, and the carpet was engrossing all her attention.

“And *I* think *yes*,” Edie answered in a decisive tone. “And when I think yes, other people ought as a matter of course to agree with me. There’s such a thing as being too generous, too delicate, too considerate, too thoughtful for others. You’ve no right to swamp your own individuality. And I say, Warren ought to have brought the yawl round to San Remo long ago, to give us all a little diversion, and not gone skulking like a pickpocket about Nice and Golfe Jouan, and Toulon and St. Tropez, for a couple of months together at a stretch,

without so much as ever even running over here to see his own mother and sister in their winter-quarters. It's not respectful to his own relations."

Elsie started. "Do you mean to say," she cried, "he's been as near as Nice without coming to see you?"

Edie nodded. "Ever since Christmas."

"No! Not really?"

"Yes, my child. Really, or I wouldn't say so. It's a practice of mine to tell the truth and shame a certain individual. Warren couldn't stop away from us any longer; so he took the yawl round by Gibraltar after—after the 17th of December, you know."—Elsie smiled sadly.—"And he's been knocking about along the coast round here ever since, afraid to come on—for fear of hurting your feelings, Elsie."

Elsie rose and clasped her hands tight. "It was very kind of him," she said. "He's a dear good fellow.—I think I could bear to meet him now. And in any case, I think he ought at least to come over and see you and your mother. It would be very selfish of me, very wrong of me to keep you all out of so

much pleasure.—Ask him to come, Edie.—Tell him—it would not hurt me very much to see him.”

Edie’s eyes flashed mischievous fire. “That’s a pretty sort of message to send any one,” she cried, with some slight amusement. “We usually put it in a politer form. May I vary it a little and tell him, Elsie, it will give you great pleasure to see him?”

“If you like,” Elsie answered, quite simply and candidly. He was a nice fellow, and he was Edie’s brother. She must grow accustomed to meeting him somehow. No man was anything at all to her now.—And perhaps by this time he had quite forgotten his foolish fancy.

The celebrated centreboard yawl *Mud-Turtle*, of the port of London, Relf, master, seventeen tons registered burden, was at that moment lying up snugly by a wooden pier in the quaint little French harbour of St. Tropez, just beyond the blue peaks of the frontier mountains. When Potts next morning early brought a letter on board, addressed to the skipper, with an Italian stamp duly stuck in

the corner, Warren Relf opened it hastily with doubtful expectations. Its contents made his honest brown cheek burn bright red. "My dear old Warren," the communication ran shortly, "you may bring the yawl round here to San Remo as soon as you like. She says you may come; and what's more, She authorizes me to inform you in the politest terms that it will give her very great pleasure indeed to see you. So you can easily imagine the pride and delight with which I am ever, Your affectionate and successful sister,

EDIE."

"Edie's a brick!" Warren said to himself with a bound of his heart; "and it's really awfully kind of—Elsie."

Before ten o'clock that same morning, the celebrated centreboard yawl *Mud-Turtle*, manned by her owner and his constant companion, was under way with a favouring wind, and scudding like a seabird, with all canvas on, round the spit of Bordighera, on her voyage to the tiny harbour of San Remo.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BALANCE QUIVERS.

MARCH, April, May passed away : anemones and asphodels came and went ; narcissus and globe-flower bloomed and withered ; and Warren Relf, cruising about in the *Mud-Turtle* round the peacock-blue bays and indentations of the Genoese Riviera, had spent many cloudless days in quiet happiness at the pretty little villa among the clambering olive terraces on the slopes at San Remo. Elsie had learnt at least to tolerate his presence now : she no longer blushed a vivid crimson when she saw him coming up the zigzag roadway ; she wasn't much more awkward before him, in fact, than with other creatures of his sex in general ; nay, more, as a mere friend she rather liked and enjoyed his society than otherwise. Not to have

liked Warren Relf, indeed, would have been quite unpardonable. The Relfs had all shown her so much kindness, and Warren himself had been so chivalrously courteous, that even a heart of stone might surely have melted somewhat towards the manly young painter. And Elsie's heart, in spite of Hugh's unkindness, was by no means stony. She found Warren, in his rough sailor clothes, always gentle, always unobtrusive, always thoughtful, always considerate; and as Edie's brother, she got on with him quite as comfortably in the long run as could be expected of anybody under such trying circumstances.

At first, to be sure, she couldn't be induced to board the deck of the busy little *Mud-Turtle*. But as May came round with its warm Italian sunshine, Edie so absolutely insisted on her taking a trip with them along that enchanted coast towards Monaco and Villefranche, beneath the ramping crags of the Tête du Chien, that Elsie at last gave way in silence, and accompanied them round the bays and headlands and roadsteads of the Riviera on more than one delightful outing. Edie was beginning, by her simple domestic

faith in her brother's profound artistic powers, to inspire Elsie, too, with a new sort of interest in Warren's future. It began to dawn upon her slowly, in a dim chaotic fashion, that Warren had really a most unusual love for the byways of nature, and a singular faculty for reading and interpreting with loving skill her hidden hieroglyphics. "My dear," Edie said to her once, as they sat on deck and watched Warren labouring with ceaseless care at the minute growth of a spreading stain on a bare wall of seaward rock, "he *shall* succeed—he *must* succeed! I mean to make him. He shall be hung. A man who can turn out work like that must secure in the end his recognition."

"I don't want recognition," Warren answered slowly, putting a few more lingering microscopic touches to the wee curved frondlets of the creeping lichen. "I do it because I like to do it. The work itself is its own reward. If only I could earn enough to save you and the dear old Mater from having to toil and moil like a pair of galley-slaves, Edie, I should be amply satisfied, and more than satisfied.—I confess, I should like

to do that, of course. In art, as elsewhere, the labourer is worthy of his hire, no doubt: he would prefer to earn his own bread and butter. It's hard to work and work, and work and work, and get scarcely any sale after all for one's pictures."

"It'll come in time," Edie answered, nodding sagaciously. "People will find out they're compelled at last to recognize your genius. And that's the best success of all, in the long run—the success that comes without one's ever seeking it. The men who aim at succeeding, succeed for a day. The men who work at their art for their art's sake, and leave success to mind its own business, are the men who finally live for ever."

"It doesn't do them much good, though, I'm afraid," Warren answered, with a sigh, hardly looking up from his fragments of orange-brown vegetation. "They seldom live to see their final triumph."

"'For praise is his who builds for his own age ;

But he that builds for time, must look to time for
wage!'"

As he said it, he glanced aside nervously at

Elsie. What a slip of the tongue! Without remembering for a moment whom he was quoting, he had quoted with thoughtless ease a familiar couplet from the "Echoes from Callimachus."

Elsie's face showed no passing sign of recognition, however. Perhaps she had never read the lines he was thinking of; perhaps, if not, she had quite forgotten them. At any rate, she only murmured reflectively to Edie: "I think, with you, Mr. Relf *must* succeed in the end. But how soon, it would be difficult to say. He'll have to educate his public, to begin with, up to his own level. When I first saw his work, I could see very little myself to praise in it. Now, every day, I see more and more. It's like all good work; it gains upon you as you study it closely."

Warren turned round to her with a face like a girl's. "Thank you," he said gently, and said no more. But she could see that her praise had moved him to the core. For two or three minutes, he left off painting; he only fumbled with a dry brush at the outline of the lichens, and pretended to be making

invisible improvements in the petty details of his delicate foreground. She observed that his hand was trembling too much to continue work. After a short pause he laid down his palette and colours. "I shall leave off now," he said, "till the sun gets lower; it's too hot just at present to paint properly."

Elsie pitied the poor young man from the bottom of her soul. She was really afraid he was falling in love with her. And if only he knew how hopeless that would be! She had a heart once; and Hugh had broken it.

That evening, in the sacred recess of Elsie's room, Edie and Elsie talked things over together in girlish confidence. The summer was coming on apace now. What was Elsie to do when the Relfs returned, as they must return, to England?

She could never go back. That was a fixed point, round which as pivot the rest of the question revolved vaguely. She could never expose herself to the bare chance of meeting Hugh and—and Mrs. Massinger. She didn't say so, of course; no need to say it; she was far too profoundly wounded for

that. But Edie and she both took it for granted in perfect silence. They understood one another, and wanted no language to communicate their feelings.

Suddenly, Edie had a bright idea: why not go to St. Martin Lantosque?

"Where's St. Martin Lantosque?" Elsie asked languidly. Her own future was not a subject that aroused in her mind any profound or enthusiastic interest.

"St. Martin Lantosque, my dear," Edie answered with her brisker, more matter-of-fact manner, "is a sort of patent safety-valve or overflow cistern for the surplus material of the Nice season. As soon as the summer grows unendurably hot on the Promenade des Anglais, the population of the *pensions* and hotels on the sea-front manifest a mutually repulsive influence—like the particles of a gas, according to that prodigiously learned book you teach the girls elementary physics out of. The heat, in fact, acts expansively; it drives them forcibly apart in all directions—some to England, some to St. Petersburg, some to America, and some to the Italian lakes or the Bernese Oberland. Well, that's

what becomes of most of them : they melt away into different atmospheres ; but a few visitors—the people with families who make Nice their real home, not the mere sun-worshippers who want to loll on the chairs on the Quai Masséna or in the Jardin Public, retire for the summer only just as far as St. Martin Lantosque. It's a jolly little place, right up among the mountains, thirty miles or so behind Nice, as beautiful as a butterfly, and as cool as a cucumber, and supplied with all the necessaries of life from afternoon tea to a consular chaplain. It's surrounded by the eternal snows, if you like them eternal ; and well situated for penny ices, if you prefer your glaciers in that mitigated condition. And if you went there, you might manage to combine business with pleasure, you see, by giving lessons to the miserable remnants of the Nice season. Lots of the families must have little girls : lots of the little girls must be pining for instruction : lots of the mammas must be eager to find suitable companionship ; and a Girton graduate's the very person to supply them all with just what they want in the finest perfection.

We'll look the matter up, Elsie. I spy an opening."

"Will your brother come here next winter, Edie?"

"I know no just cause or impediment why he shouldn't, my dear. He usually does one winter with another. It's a way he has, to follow his family. He takes his pleasure out in the exercise of the domestic affections.—But why do you ask me?"

"Because"—and Elsie hesitated for a moment—"I think—if he does—I oughtn't to stay here."

"Nonsense, my dear," Edie answered promptly. It was the best way to treat Elsie. "You needn't be afraid. I know what you mean. But don't distress yourself: men's hearts will stand a fearful deal of breaking. It doesn't hurt them. They're coarse earthenware to our egg-shell porcelain. He must just pine away with unrequited affection in his own way as long as he likes. Never mind *him*. It'll do him good. It's yourself and ourselves you've got to think of. He's quite happy as long as he's allowed to paint his own unsaleable pictures in peace and quietness."

"I wish he could sell them," Elsie went on reflectively. "I really do. It's a shame a man who can paint so beautifully and so poetically as he does should have to wait so long and patiently for his recognition. He strikes too high a note; that's what's the matter. And yet I wouldn't like to see him try any lower one. I didn't understand him at first, myself; and I'm sure I find as much in nature as most people.—But you want to have looked at things for some time together, through his pair of spectacles, before you can catch them exactly as he does. The eye that sees is half the vision."

"My dear," Edie answered in her cheery way, "we'll make him succeed. We'll push him and pull him. He'll never do it if he's left to his own devices, I'm sure. He's too utterly wrapped up in his work itself to think much of the reception the mere vulgar picture-buying world accords it. The chink of the guinea never distracts his ear from higher music. But I'm a practical person, thank heaven—a woman of affairs—and I mean to advertise him. They ought to hang him, and he shall be hung. I'm going to

see to it. I shall get Mr. Hatherley to crack him up—Mr. Hatherley has such a lot of influence, you know, with the newspapers. Let's roll the log with cheerful persistence. We shall float him yet; you see if we don't. He shall be Warren Relf, R.A., with a tail to his name, before you and I have done launching him."

"I hope so," Elsie murmured with a quiet sigh.

If Warren Relf could have heard that conversation, he might have plucked up heart of grace indeed for the future. When a woman begins to feel a living interest in a man's career, there's hope for him yet in that woman's affections. Though, to be sure, Elsie herself would have been shocked to believe it. She cherished her sorrow still in her heart of hearts as her dearest chattel, her most sacred possession. She brought incense and tears to it daily with pious awe. Woman-like, she loved to take it out of its shrine and cry over it each night in her own room alone, as a religious exercise. She was faithful to the Hugh that had never been, though the Hugh that really was had proved so utterly

base and unworthy of her. For that first Hugh's sake, she would never love any other man. She could only feel for Warren Relf the merest sisterly interest and grateful friendship.

However, we must be practical, come what may; we must eat and drink though our hearts ache. So it was arranged at last that Elsie should retire for the summer to the cool shades of St. Martin Lantosque; while the Relfs returned to their tiny house at 128, Bletchingley Road, London, W. A few pupils were even secured by hook and by crook for the off-season, and a home provided for Elsie with an American family, in search of culture in the cheapest market, who had hired a villa in the patent safety-valve, to avoid the ever unpleasant necessity for returning to the land of their birth, across the stormy millpond, for the hot summer. The day before the Relfs took their departure from San Remo, Elsie had a few words alone with Warren in the pretty garden of the Villa Rossa. There was one thing she wanted to ask him particularly—a special favour, yet a very delicate one. “Shall you

be down about the coast of Suffolk much this year?" she asked timidly. And Warren gathered at once what she meant. "Yes," he answered in almost as hesitating a voice as her own, looking down at the prickly-pears and green lizards by his feet, and keeping his eyes studiously from meeting hers; "I shall be cruising round, no doubt, at Yarmouth and Whitestrand, and Lowestoft and Aldeburgh."

She noticed how ingeniously he had mixed them all up together in a single list, as if none were more interesting to her mind than the other; and she added in an almost inaudible voice: "If you go to Whitestrand, I wish very much you would let me know about poor dear Winifred."

"I will let you know," he answered, with a bound of his heart, proud even to be intrusted with that doubtful commission. "I'll make it my business to go there almost at once.—And I may write and tell you how I find her, mayn't I?"

Elsie drew back, a little frightened at his request. "Edie could tell me, couldn't she? That would save you the trouble," she mur-

mured after a pause, not without some faint undercurrent of conscious hypocrisy.

His face fell. He was disappointed that he might not write to her himself on so neutral a matter. "As you will," he answered, with a down-cast look. "Eddie shall do it, then."

Elsie's heart was divided within her. She saw her reply had hurt and distressed him. He was *such* a good fellow, and he would be so pleased to write. But if only he knew how hopeless it was! What folly to encourage him, when nothing on earth could ever come of it! She wished she knew what she ought to do under these trying circumstances. Gratitude would urge her to say Yes, of course; but regard for his own happiness would make her say No with crushing promptitude. It was better he should understand at once, without appeal, that it was quite impossible—a dream of the wildest. She glanced at him shyly and caught his eye; she fancied it was just a trifle dimmed. She was *so* sorry for him. "Very well, Mr. Relf," she murmured, relenting and taking his hand for a moment to say good-bye.

“ You can write yourself, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Warren’s heart gave a great jump. “ Thank you,” he said, wringing her hand, oh, so hard ! “ You are very kind.—Good-bye, Miss Challoner.” And he raised his hat and departed all tremulous. He went down that afternoon to the *Mud-Turtle* in the harbour the happiest man alive in the whole of San Remo.

CHAPTER XXV.

CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON.

THE Massingers pitched their tent at White-strand again for August. Hugh did his best indeed to put off the evil day ; but if you sell your soul for gold, you must take the gold with all its encumbrances ; and Winifred's will was a small encumbrance that Hugh had never for one moment reckoned upon in his ante-nuptial calculations of advantages and drawbacks. He took it for granted he was marrying a mere girl, whom he could mould and fashion to his own whim and fancy. That simple, childish, blushing little thing had a will of her own, however—ay, more, plenty of it. When Hugh proposed with an insinuating smile that they should run down for the summer to Barmouth or Aberystwith—he loved North Wales—Winifred replied

with quiet dignity : " Wales is stuffy. There's nothing so bracing as the east coast. After a London season, one needs bracing. I feel pulled down. We'll go and stop with mamma at Whitestrand." And she shut her little mouth upon it with a snap like a rat-trap. Against that solid rock of sheer resolution, Hugh shattered himself to no purpose in showery spray of rhetoric and reasoning. Gibraltar is not more disdainful of the foam that dashes upon its eternal cliffs year after year than Winifred was to her husband's running fire of argument and expostulation. She never deigned to argue in return ; she merely repeated with naked iteration ten thousand times over the categorical formula, " We'll go to Whitestrand."

And to Whitestrand they went in due time. The plastic male character can no more resist the ceaseless pressure of feminine persistence than clay can resist the hands of the potter, or wood the weeping effect of heat and dryness. Hugh took his way obediently to dull flat Suffolk when August came, and relinquished with a sigh his dreams of delicious picnics by the Dolgelly waterfalls,

and his mental picture of those phenomenally big trout—three pounds apiece, fisherman's weight—that lurk uncaught in the deep green pools among the rocks and stickles of the plashing Wnion. The Bard had sold himself for prompt cash to the first bidder : he found when it was too late he had sold himself unknown into a mitigated form of marital slavery. The purchaser made her own terms : Hugh was compelled meekly to accept them.

Two strong wills were clashing together. In serious matters, neither would yield. Each must dint and batter the other.

They did *not* occupy Elsie's room this time. Hugh had stipulated with all his might for that concession beforehand. He would never pass a night in that room again, he said : the paint or the woodwork or the chairs or something made him hopelessly sleepless. In these old houses, sanitary arrangements were always bad. Winifred darted a piercing look at him as he shuffled uneasily over that lame excuse. Already a vague idea was framing itself piecemeal in her woman's mind—a very natural idea, when she saw him so moody

and preoccupied and splenetic—that Hugh had been really in love with Elsie, and was in love with Elsie still, even now that Elsie was away in Australia—else why this unconquerable and absurd objection to Elsie's room? Did he think he had deceived and ill-treated Elsie?

A woman's mind goes straight to the bull's-eye. No use pretending to mislead her with side-issues; she flings them aside with a contemptuous smile, and proceeds at once to worm her way to the kernel of the matter.

August wore away, and September came in; and Hugh continued to mope and to bore himself to his heart's content at that detestable Whitestrand. To distract his soul, he worked hard at his "Ode to Manetho;" but even Manetho, audacious theme, gave him scanty consolation. Nay, his quaint "Legend of Fee-Faw-Fum," that witty apologue, with its grimly humorous catalogue of all possible nightly fears, supplied him with food but for one solitary morning's meditation. You can't cast out your blue-devils by poking fun at them; those cerulean demons will not be laughed down or rudely exorcised by such

simple means. They recur in spite of you with profound regularity. The *fons et origo mali* was still present. That hateful poplar still fronted his eyes wherever he moved : that window with the wistaria still haunted his sight whenever he tried to lounge at his ease on the lawn or in the garden. The river, the sandhills, the meadows, the walks, all, all were poisoned to him : all spoke of Elsie. Was ever Nemesis more hideous or more complete ? Was ever punishment more omnipresent ? He had gained all he wished, and lost his own soul ; at every turn of his own estate some horrible memento of his shame and his guilt rose up to confuse him. He wished he was dead every day he lived : dead, and asleep in his grave, beside Elsie.

As that dreaded anniversary, the seventeenth of September, slowly approached—the anniversary, as Hugh felt it, of Elsie's murder—his agitation and his gloom increased visibly. Winifred wondered silently to herself what on earth could ail him. During the last few weeks, he seemed to have become another man. An atmosphere of horror and doubt surrounded him. On the fifteenth, two

days before the date of Elsie's disappearance, she went up hastily to their common room. The door was half-locked, but not securely fastened : it yielded to a sudden jerk of her wrist, and she entered abruptly—to find Hugh, with a guilty red face, pushing away a small bundle of letters and a trinket of some kind into a tiny cabinet which he always mysteriously carried about with him. She had hardly time to catch them distinctly, but the trinket looked like a watch or a locket. The letters, too, she managed to note, were tied together with an elastic band, and numbered in clear red ink on the envelopes. More than that she had no chance to see. But her feminine curiosity was strongly excited ; the more so as Hugh banged down the lid on its spring-lock with guilty haste, and proceeded with hot and fiery fingers to turn the key upon the whole set in his own portmanteau.

“ Hugh,” she cried, standing still to gaze upon him, “ what do you keep in that little cabinet ? ”

Hugh turned upon her as she had never before seen him turn. No longer clay in the

hands of the potter, he stood stiff and hard like adamant then. "If I had meant you to know," he said coldly, "I would have told you long ago. I did not tell you, therefore I do not mean you to know. Ask me no questions. This incident is now closed. Say nothing more about it." And he turned on his heel, and left her astonished.

That was all. Winifred cried the night through, but Hugh remained still absolute adamant. Next morning, she altered her tactics completely, and drying her eyes once for all, said never another word on the subject. She even pretended to be cheerful and careless. When a woman pretends to be cheerful and careless after a domestic scene, the luckless man whose destiny she holds in the hollow of her hand may well tremble, especially if there is something he wants to conceal from her. She means to egg it all out, and egged out it will all be, as certainly as the sun will rise to-morrow. It may take a long time, but it will come for all that. A woman on the track of a secret, pretending carelessness, is a dangerous animal. She will go far. *Hanc tu, Romane, caveto.*

On the sixteenth, Winifred formed a little plan of her own, which she ventilated with childish effusion at lunch-time. "Hugh, dear," she said in her most winning voice, "do you happen to remember—if you've time for such trifles—that to-morrow's a very special anniversary?"

Hugh's cheek blanched as if by magic. What devilry was this? What deliberate cruelty? For the moment his usual courage and presence of mind forsook him. Had Winifred, then, found out everything?—A special anniversary, indeed! As if he could forget it!—And that she, for whose sake—with the manor of Whitestrand thrown in—he had done it all and made himself next door to a murderer—that she, of all people in the world, should cast it in his teeth, and make bitter game of him about Elsie's death! "Well, Winifred," he answered in a strange low voice, looking hard at her eyes: "I suppose I'm not likely to forget it, am I?"

Winifred noted the tone, silently. Aloud, she gave no token in any way of having observed his singular manner.—"It's a year to-morrow since Hugh proposed to me, you

know, mamma dear," she went on, in her quietest and most cutting voice, turning round to her mother, "and he does me the honour to say politely he isn't likely to forget the occasion.—For a whole year, he's actually remembered it. But it seems to make him terribly grumpy.—Never mind, Hugh; I'll let you off. I'm a sweet little angel, and I'm not going to be angry with my great bear: so there, Mr. Constellation, you see I've forgiven you.—Now, what I was going to say's just this. As to-morrow's a special anniversary in our lives, I propose we should celebrate it with becoming dignity."

"Which means, I suppose, the ordinary British symbol of merry-making, a plum-pudding for dinner," Hugh interposed bitterly. He saw his mistake with perfect clearness now, but he hadn't the tact or the grace to conceal it, with a woman's cleverness, under a show of good-humour.

"A plum-pudding is *banal*," Winifred answered with a smile—"distinctly *banal*. I'm surprised a member of the Cheyne Row set should even dream of suggesting it. What would Mr. Hatherley say if he heard

the Immortal One make such a proposition ? He'd detect in it the strong savour of Philistia ; he'd declare you'd joined the hosts of Goliath.—No. It isn't a plum-pudding. My idea's this. Why shouldn't we go for a family picnic, just our three selves, in honour of the occasion ? ”

“ A picnic ! ” Hugh cried, aghast—“ a picnic to-morrow !—On the seventeenth ! ”—Then recollecting himself once more, he added hastily : “ In this unsettled weather ! The sandhills are soaked. There isn't a place on the whole estate one could arrange to seat one's self down on comfortably.”

“ I hadn't thought of the sandhills,” Winifred answered with quiet dignity. “ I thought it'd be awfully nice if we all bespoke a dry seat in Mr. Relf's yawl—— ”

“ Relf's yawl ! ” Hugh cried aloud, with increasing excitement. “ You don't mean to say that creature's here again ! ”

“ That creature, I'm in a position to state without reserve,” Winifred answered chillily, “ ran up the river to the Fisherman's Rest late last night, as lively as ever. I saw the *Mud-Turtle* come in myself, before a chipping

breeze! And Mrs. Stannaway told me this morning Mr. Relf was a-lying off the hard, just opposite Stannaway's. So I thought it'd be a capital plan, in memory of old times, if we got Mr. Relf to take us down in the yawl to Orfordness, land us comfortably at the Low Light, and let us picnic on the nice dry ridge of big shingle just above the graveyard where they bury the wrecked sailors."

Hugh's whole soul was on fire within him; but his face was pale, and his hands deadly cold. Was this pure accident, mere coincidence, or was it designed and deliberate torture on Winifred's part, he wondered? To picnic in sight of Elsie's nameless grave, on the very anniversary of Elsie's death, with every concomitant of pretended rejoicing that could make that ghastly act more ghastly still than it would otherwise be in its own mere naked brutality! It was too sickening to think upon. But did Winifred know? Could Winifred mean it as a punishment for his silence? Or had she merely blundered upon that horrible proposition as a sheer coincidence out of pure accident?

As a matter of fact, the last solution was

the true and simple one. The sandhills, or Orfordness, were the two recognized alternative picnicking places where all White-strand invariably disported itself. If you didn't go to the one, you went as a matter of course to the other. There was no third way open to the most deliberate and statesmanlike of mortals. The Meyseys had gone to Orfordness for years. Why not go there on the anniversary of Winnie's engagement? To Winifred, the proposal seemed simplicity itself; to Hugh, it seemed like a strangely perverse and cunning piece of sheer feminine cruelty.

"There's nothing to see at Orfordness," he said shortly—"nothing but a great bare bank of sand and shingle, and a couple of light-houses, standing alone in a perfect desert of desolation.—Besides, the weather's just beastly.—Much better stop at home as usual by ourselves, and eat our dinner here in peace and quietness! This isn't the sort of season for picnicking."

"Oh! but Hugh," Mrs. Meysey put in, with her maternal authority, "you know we always go to Orfordness. It's really quite a

charming place in its way. The sands are so broad and hard and romantic. We sail down, and picnic at the lighthouse; and then we get a man to row us across the river at the back to Orford Castle—there's a splendid view from Orford Castle—and altogether it makes a delightful excursion, of its kind, for Suffolk. We ought to do something to commemorate the day.—If we weren't in such deep mourning still"—and Mrs. Meysey glanced down with a conventional sigh at her crape excrescences—"we'd ask a few friends in to dinner; but I'm afraid it's a little too soon for that. Still, at any rate, there could be no harm—not the slightest harm—in our just running down to Orfordness for a family picnic. It's precisely the same as lunching at home here together."

"Do you remember, Hugh," Winifred went on, musingly, putting the screw on, "how we walked out that morning, a year ago, by the water-side; and how you picked a bit of forget-me-not and meadow-sweet from the bank and gave it me; and what pretty verses about undying love you repeated as you gave it?—And in the evening,

mamma, I had to go out to dinner, all alone with you and poor dear papa, to Snade vicarage! I recollect how angry and annoyed I was because I had to go out and leave Hugh that particular evening! and because I'd worn that same dinner dress at Snade vicarage three parties running!"

"Yes," Mrs. Meysey continued, with another deep-drawn sigh; "and what a night that was, to be sure! So full of surprises! It was the night, you know, when poor Elsie Challoner ran away from us. *You* got engaged to Hugh in the morning, and in the evening Elsie disappeared as if by magic! Such a coincidence! Poor dear Elsie! Not a year ago! A year, tomorrow!"

"No, mother dear. That was the eighteenth. I was engaged on the Wednesday, you recollect, and it was the Thursday when we found out Elsie had gone away from us."

"Thursday the eighteenth when we found it out, dear," Mrs. Meysey repeated in a decisive voice (the maternal mind is strong on dates); "but Wednesday the seventeenth,

late in the evening, of course, when she went away from us.—Poor dear Elsie! I wonder what's become of her! It's curious she doesn't write to you oftener, Winifred."

Were they working upon his feelings, of *malice prepense*? Were they trying to make him blurt out the truth? he wondered. Hugh Massinger in his agony could stand it no longer. He rose from the table and went over to the window. There, the poplar stared him straight in the face. He turned around and looked hard at Winifred. Her expressionless blue eyes were placid as usual. "Then, if it's fine," she said, in an insipid voice, "we'll ask Mr. Relf to give us a lift down to Orfordness to-morrow in the *Mud-Turtle*."

"No!" Hugh thundered in an angry tone. "However you go, Relf shan't take you. I don't want to see any more of Relf. I dislike Relf; I object to Relf. He's a mean cur! I won't go anywhere with Relf in future."

"But, children, you should never let your angry passions rise," Winifred murmured provokingly. "Your little hands were never meant to tear each other's eyes. If he doesn't

want to go in Mr. Relf's boat, he shan't be made to, then, poor little fellow. He shall do exactly as he likes himself. He shall have another boat all of his own. I'll order one this evening for him at Martin's or at Stannaway's."

"If it's fine," Mrs. Meysey interposed parenthetically.

"If it's fine, of course," Winifred answered, rising. "We don't want to picnic in a torrent of rain.—Whatever else we may be, we're rational animals.—But how do you know, Hugh, what Orfordness is like? You can't tell. You've never been there."

"I went there once alone last year," Hugh answered sulkily; "and I saw enough of the beastly hole then to know very well I don't desire its further acquaintance."

"But you never told me you'd been over there."

Hugh managed to summon up a sardonic smile. "I wasn't married to you then, Winnie," he answered, with a savage snarl, that showed his projecting canines with most unpleasant distinctness. "My goings-out and my comings-in were not yet a matter

of daily domestic inquisition. I hadn't to report myself every time I came or went, like a soldier in barracks to his commanding officer.—I went to Orfordness one day for a walk—by myself—unbidden—for my own amusement.”

All that afternoon and late into the evening, Hugh watched the clouds and the barometer eagerly. His fate that day hung upon a spider's web. If it rained to-morrow, all might yet be well; if not, he felt in his own soul they stood within measurable distance of a domestic cataclysm. He would not go to Orfordness with Winifred. He could not go to Orfordness with Winifred. That much was certain. He could not picnic, on the anniversary of Elsie's death, within sight of Elsie's nameless grave, in company with those two strange women—his wife and his mother-in-law. Ugh! how he hated the bare idea! If it came to the worst—if it was fine to-morrow—he must either break for ever with Winifred—for she would never give in—or else he must fling himself off the roots of the poplar, where Elsie had flung

herself off that day twelve months ago, and drown as she had drowned among the angry breakers.

There would be a certain dramatic completeness and roundness about that particular fate which commended itself especially to Hugh Massinger's poetical nature. It would read so like a Greek tragedy—a tale of *Atè* and *Hubris* and *Nemesis*. Even from the point of view of the outer world, who knew but the husk, it would seem romantic enough to drown one's self, disconsolate, on the very anniversary of one's first engagement to the young wife one meant to leave an untimely widow. But to Hugh Massinger himself, who knew the whole kernel and core of the story, it would be infinitely more romantic and charming in its way to drown one's self off the self-same poplar on the self-same day that Elsie had drowned herself. No bard could wish for a gloomier or more appropriate death. Would it rain or shine? On that slender thread of doubt his whole future now hung and trembled.

The morning of the seventeenth dawned at last, and Hugh rose early, to draw aside the

bedroom blinds for a moment. A respite! a respite! It was pouring a regular English downpour. There was no hope—or no danger, rather—of a picnic to-day. Thank Heaven for that. It put off his fate. It saved him the inconvenience and worry of having to drown himself this particular morning. And yet the *dénouement* would have been so strictly dramatic that he almost regretted a shower of rain should intervene to spoil it.

At ten o'clock he started out alone in the blinding downpour and took the train as far as Aldeburgh. Thence he followed the shingle beach to Orfordness, plodding on, as he had done a year before, over the loose stones, but through drenching rain, instead of under hot and blazing sunlight. When he reached the lighthouse, he sat himself down in pilgrim guise beside Elsie's grave in the steady drip, and did penance once more by that unknown tomb in solemn silence. Not even the lighthouse-man came out this time to gaze at him in wonder; it poured too hard and too persistently for that. He sat there alone for half an hour, by Elsie's

watch; for he had wound it that morning with reverent hands, and brought it away with him for that very purpose. A little rusty, perhaps, from the sea, it would keep good time enough still for all he needed. At the end of the half-hour he rose once more, plodded back again over the shingle in his dripping clothes, and catching the last train home to Almundham, reached Whitestrand just in time to dress for dinner.

Winifred was waiting for him at the front door, white with emotion—not so much anger as slighted affection. “Where have you been?” she asked, in a cold voice, as he arrived at the porch, a dripping, draggled, wearied pedestrian, in a soaking suit of last year’s tweeds.

“Didn’t I say well I was bound to report myself to my commanding officer?” Hugh answered tauntingly. “All right, then; I proceed at once to report myself. I may as well tell you as leave you to worry. I’ve been to Orfordness—alone—tramped it.”

“To Orfordness!” his wife echoed in profound astonishment. “You didn’t want to go with us there if it was fine. Why, what

on earth, Hugh, did you ever go there in this pelting rain for?"

"Your mother recommended it," Hugh answered sullenly, "as a place of amusement. She said it was altogether a most delightful excursion. She praised the sands as firm and romantic. So I thought I'd try it on her recommendation. I found it damp, decidedly damp.—Send me my shoes, please!" And that was all the explanation he ever vouchsafed her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

REPORTING PROGRESS.

WARREN RELF spent many days that summer at Whitestrand, cruising vaguely about the mouth of the Char, or wandering and sketching among the salt-marsh meadows; but he never happened to come face to face, by accident or design, with Hugh Massinger. Fate seemed persistently to interpose between them. Once or twice, indeed, Winifred said with some slight asperity to her husband, "Don't you think, Hugh, if it were only for old acquaintance' sake, we ought to ask that creature Relf some day to dinner?"

But Hugh, who was yielding enough in certain matters, was as marble here: he could never consent to receive his enemy, of his own accord, beneath his own roof—for Whitestrand, after all, was his own in reality. "No," he growled out, looking up from his

paper testily. "I don't like the fellow. I've heard things about him that make me sorry I ever accepted his hospitality. If you happen to meet him, Winifred, prowling about the place and trying to intercept you, I forbid you to speak to him."

"You forbid me, Hugh?"

"Yes"—coldly—"I forbid you."

Winifred bit her lip, and was discreetly silent. No need to answer. Those two proud wills were beginning already to clash more ominously one against the other. "Very well," the young wife thought in silence to herself; "if he means to mew me up, seraglio and zenana fashion, in my own rooms, he should hire a guard and some Circassian slaves, and present me with a *yashmak* to cover my face with."

A day or two later, as she strolled on some errand into the placid village, she came suddenly upon Warren Relf, in his rough jersey and sailor cap, hanging about the lane, sketch-book in hand, not without some vague expectation, as Hugh had said, of accidentally intercepting her. It was a painful duty, but Elsie had laid it upon him; and Elsie's will

was law now. Naturally, he had never told Elsie about the meeting with Hugh at the Cheyne Row Club. If he had, she would never have imposed so difficult, delicate, and dangerous a task upon him. But she knew nothing; and so she had sent him on this painful errand.

Winifred smiled a frank smile of recognition as she came up close to him. The painter pulled off his awkward cap awkwardly and unskilfully.

"You were going to pass me by, Mr. Relf," she said, with a good-humoured nod. "You won't recognize me or have anything to do with me, perhaps, now I'm married and done for!"

The words gave him an uncomfortable thrill; they seemed so ominous, so much truer than she thought them.

"I hardly *did* know you," he answered with a forced smile. "I've not been accustomed to see you in black before, Mrs. Massinger.—And to say the truth, when I come to look at you, you're paler and thinner than when I last met you."

Winifred coughed—a little dry cough.

Women always take sympathetic remarks about their ill health in a disparaging sense to their personal appearance. "A London season!" she answered smiling; yet even her smile had a certain unwonted air of sadness about it. "Too many of Mrs. Bouverie Barton's literary evenings have unhinged me, I suppose. My small brains have been overstimulated.—You've not been up to the Hall yet to see us, Mr. Relf. I saw the *Mud-Turtle* come ploughing bravely in some three or four days ago, and I wondered you'd never looked up old friends.—For of course you know I owe you something: it was you who first brought dear Hugh to Whitestrand."

How Warren ever got through the remainder of that slippery interview, gliding with difficulty over the thin ice, he hardly knew. He walked with Winifred to the end of the lane, talking in vague generalities of politeness; and then, with some lame excuse of the state of the tide, he took a brusque and hasty leave of her. He felt himself guilty for talking to her at all, considering the terms on which he stood with her husband.

But Elsie's will overrode everything. When he wrote to Elsie, that letter he had looked forward to so long and eagerly, it was with a heavy heart and an accusing conscience; for he felt somehow, from the forced gaiety of Winifred's ostentatiously careless manner, that things were not going quite so smoothly as a wedding-bell at the Hall already. That poor young wife was ill at ease. However, for Elsie's sake, he would make the best of it. Why worry and trouble poor heart-broken Elsie more than absolutely needful with Winifred's possible or actual misfortunes?

"I didn't meet your cousin himself," he wrote with a very doubtful hand—it was hard to have even to refer to the subject at all to Elsie; "but I came across Mrs. Massinger one afternoon, strolling in the lane, with her pet pug, and looking very prettily in her light half-mourning, though a trifle paler and thinner than I had yet known her. She attributes her paleness, however, to too much gaiety during the London season and to the late hours of our Bohemian society. I hope a few weeks at Whitestrand will set her fully up again, and that when I have next an

opportunity of meeting her, I may be able to send you a good report of her health and happiness."

How meagre, how vapid, how jejune, how conventional! Old Mrs. Walpole of the vicarage herself could not have worded it more baldly or more flabbily. And this was the letter he had been burning to write: this the opportunity he had been so eagerly awaiting! What a note to send to his divine Elsie! He tore it up and wrote it again half-a-dozen times over, before he was finally satisfied to accept his dissatisfaction as an immutable, inevitable, and unconquerable fact. And then, he compensated himself by writing out in full, for his own mere subjective gratification, the sort of letter he would have liked to write her, if circumstances permitted it—a burning letter of fervid love, beginning, "My own darling, darling Elsie," and ending, with hearts and darts and tears and protestations, "Yours ever devotedly and lovingly, WARREN." Which done, he burned the second genuine letter in a solemn holocaust with a lighted fusee, and sent off that stilted formal note to "Dear Miss

Challoner" with many regrets and despondent aspirations. And as soon as he had dropped it into the village letter-box, all aglow with shame, the *Mud-Turtle* was soon under way, with full canvas set, before a breathless air, on her voyage once more to Lowestoft.

But Winifred never mentioned to Hugh that she had met and spoken to "that creature Relf," with whom he had so sternly and authoritatively forbidden her to hold any sort of communication. That was bad—a beginning of evil. The first great breach was surely opening out by slow degrees between them.

A week later, as the yawl lay idle on her native mud in Yarmouth harbour, Warren Relf, calling at the post-office for his expected budget, received a letter with a French stamp on it, and a post-mark bearing the magical words, "St. Martin Lantosque, Alpes Maritimes," which made his quick breath come and go spasmodically. He tore it open with a beating heart. "Dear Mr. Relf," it said simply—"How very kind of you to take the trouble of going to Whitestrand and

sending me so full and careful an account of dear Winifred. Thank you ever so much for all your goodness. But you are always kind. I have learnt to expect it.—Yours very sincerely, **ELSIE CHALLONER.**”

That was all : those few short words ; but Warren Relf lived on that brief note night and morning, till the time came when he might return once more in his small craft to the South and to Elsie.

When he did return, with the southward tide of invalids and swallows, Elsie had left the first poignancy of her grief a year behind her ; but Warren saw quite clearly still, with a sinking heart, that she was true as ever to the Hugh that was not and that never had been. She received him kindly, like a friend and a brother ; but her manner was none the less the cold fixed manner of a woman who has lived her life out to the bitter end, and whose heart has been broken once and for ever. When Warren saw her, his soul despaired. He felt it was cruel even to hope. But Edie, most cheerful of optimists, laughed him to scorn. “If *I* were a man,” she cried boldly, and then broke off. That favourite

feminine aposiopesis is the most cutting known form of criticism. Warren noted it, and half took heart, half desponded again more utterly than ever.

Still, he had one little buttress left for his failing hopes: there was no denying that Elsie's interest in his art, as art, increased daily. She let him give her lessons in water-colours now, and she watched his own patient and delicate work with constant attention and constant admiration, among the rocks and bays of the inexhaustible Riviera. During that second sunny winter at San Remo, in fact, they grew for the first time to know one another. Warren's devotion told slowly, for no woman is wholly proof in some lost corner of her heart against a man's determined and persistent love. She could not love him in return, to be sure: Oh no; impossible: all that was over long ago, for ever: an ingrained sense of womanly consistency barred the way to love for the rest of the ages. But she liked him immensely; she saw his strong points; she admired his earnestness, his goodness, his singleness of purpose, his worship of his art, and his hopeless and

chivalrous attachment to herself into the bargain. Its very hopelessness touched her profoundly. He could never expect her to return his love; of that she was sure; but he loved her for all that; and she acknowledged it gratefully. In one word, she liked him as much as it is possible for a woman to like a man she is not and cannot ever be in love with.

"Is that right yet, Miss Challoner?" Warren asked one day, with a glance at his canvas, as he sat with Edie and Elsie on the deck of the *Mud-Turtle*, painting in a mass of hanging ruddy-brown seaweed, whose redness of tone Elsie thought he had somewhat needlessly exaggerated.

"Why 'Miss Challoner?'" Edie asked with one of her sudden arch looks at her brother. "We're all in the family, now, you know, Warren. Why not 'Elsie?' She's Elsie of course to all the rest of us."

Warren glanced into the depths of Elsie's dark eyes with an inquiring look. "May it be, Elsie?" he asked, all tremors.

She looked back at him frankly and openly.

"Yes, Warren, if you like," she said in a

simple straightforward tone that disarmed criticism. The answer, in fact, half displeased him. She granted it too easily, with too little reserve. He would have preferred it even if she had said "No," with a trifle more coyness, more maidenly timidity. The half is often better than the whole. She assented like one to whom assent is a matter of slight importance. He had leave to call her Elsie in too brotherly a fashion. It was clear the permission meant nothing to her. And to him it might have meant so much, so much! He bit his lip, and answered shyly, "Thank you."

Eddie noted his downcast look and his suppressed sigh. "You goose!" she said afterwards. "Pray, what did you expect? Do you think the girl's bound to jump down your throat like a ripe gooseberry? If she's worth winning, she's worth waiting for. A woman who can love as Elsie has loved can't be expected to dance a polka at ten minutes' notice on the mortal remains of her dead self. But then, a woman who can love as Elsie has loved must love in the end a man worth loving.—I don't say I've a very high opinion

of you in other ways, Warren. As a man of business, you're simply nowhere; you wouldn't have sold those three pictures in London, you know, last autumn if it hadn't been for your amiable sister's persistent tout-ing; but as a marrying man, I consider you're A1, eighteen carat, a perfect hundred-guinea prize in the matrimonial market."

Before the end of the winter, Elsie and Warren found they had settled down into a quiet brotherly and sisterly relation, which to Elsie's mind left nothing further to be desired; while to Warren it seemed about as bad an arrangement as the nature of things could easily have permitted.

"It's a pity he can't sell his pictures better," Elsie said one day confidentially to Edie. "He does so deserve it; they're really lovely. Every day I watch him, I find new points in them. I begin to see now how really great they are."

"It is a pity," Edie answered mischievously. "He must devote his energies to the harmless necessary pot-boiler. For until he finds his market, my dear, he'll never be well enough off to marry."

"Oh, Edie, I couldn't bear to think he should sink to pot-boiling. And yet I should like to see him married some day to some nice good girl who'd make him happy," Elsie assented innocently.

"So should I, my child," Edie rejoined with a knowing smile. "And what's more, I mean to arrange it too. I mean to put him in a proper position for asking the nice good girl's consent. Next summer and autumn, I shall conspire with Mr. Hatherley to boom him."

"To what?" Elsie asked, puzzled.

"To boom him, my dear. *B, double o, m.*—boom him. A most noble verb, imported, I believe, with the pickled pork and the tinned peaches, direct from Chicago. To boom means, according to my private dictionary, to force into sudden and almost explosive notoriety.—That's what I'm going to do with Warren. I intend, by straightforward and unblushing advertising—in short by log-rolling—to make him go down next season with the money-getting classes as a real live painter. Their gold shall pour itself into Warren's pocket. If he wasn't a

genius, I should think it wrong; but as I know he is one, why shouldn't I boom him?"

"Why not, indeed?" Elsie answered all unconscious. "And then he might marry that nice good girl of yours, if he can get her to take him."

"The nice good girl will have to take him," Edie replied with a nod.—"When I puts my foot down, I puts it down. And I've put it down that Warren shall succeed, financially, artistically, and matrimonially. So there's nothing more to be said about it."

And indeed when Warren returned to England in the spring, to be boomed, it was with distinct permission this time from Elsie to write to her as often and as much as he wanted—in a strictly fraternal and domestic manner.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ART AT HOME.

THAT same winter made a sudden change in Hugh Massinger's financial position. He found himself the actual and undoubted possessor of the manor of Whitestrand. Winter always tried Mrs. Meysey. Like the bulk of us nowadays, her weak points were lungy. Of late, she had suffered each season more and more from bronchitis, and Hugh had done his disinterested best to persuade her to go abroad to some warmer climate. His solicitude for her health, indeed, was truly filial, and not without reason. If she chose Madeira or Algiers or Egypt, for example, she would at least be well out of her new son's way for six months of the year; and Hugh was beginning to realize, as time went on, a little too acutely that he had

married the estate and manor of Whitestrand with all its encumbrances, a mother-in-law included; while if, on the other hand, she preferred Nice or Cannes or Pau, or even Florence, or any nearer continental resort, they would at any rate have an agreeable place to visit her in, if they were suddenly summoned away to her side by the telegraphic calls of domestic piety. But Mrs. Meysey, true metal to the core, wouldn't hear of wintering away from Suffolk. She clung to Whitestrand with East Anglian persistence. Where was one better off, indeed, than in one's own house, with one's own people to tend and comfort one? If the March winds blew hard at the Hall, were there not deadly Mistrals at Mentone and gusts of foggy Föhn at dreary Davos Platz? If you gained in the daily tale of registered sunshine at Hyères or at Bordighera, did not a superabundance of olive oil diversify the stews at the table-d'hôte, and a fatal suspicion of Italian garlic poison the *fricandeau* of the second breakfast? Mrs. Meysey, in her British mood, would stand by Suffolk bravely while she lived; and if the hard gray weather killed her at last, as

it killed its one literary apologist in our modern England, she would acquiesce in the decrees of Fate, and be buried, like a Briton, by her husband's side in Whitestrand churchyard. Elizabethan Meyseys of the elder stock—in frilled ruffs and stiff starched head-dresses—smiled down upon her resolution from their niched tomb in Whitestrand church every Sunday morning: never should it be said that this, their degenerate latter-day representative, ran away from the east winds of dear old England to bask in the sunlight at Malaga or Seville, among the descendants of the godless Armada sailors, from whose wreckage and pillage those stout old squires had built up the timbers of that very Hall which she herself still worthily inhabited.

So Mrs. Meysey stopped sturdily at home; and the east wind wrecked its vengeance upon her in its wonted fashion. Early in March, Winifred was summoned by telegram from town: "Come at once. Much worse. May not live long. Bring Hugh with you." And three weeks later, another fresh grave rose eloquent in Whitestrand churchyard; and the carved and painted Elizabethan

Meyseys, smiling placidly as ever on the empty seat in the pew below, looked forward with confidence to the proximate addition of another white marble tablet with a black epitaph to the family collection in the Whitestrand chancel.

The moment was a specially trying one for Winifred. A month later, a little heir to the Whitestrand estates was expected to present himself on the theatre of existence. When he actually arrived upon the stage of life, however, poor frail little waif, it was only just to be carried across it once, a speechless supernumerary, in a nurse's arms, and to breathe his small soul out in a single gasp before he had even learnt how to cry aloud like an English baby. This final misfortune, coming close on the heels of all the rest, broke down poor Winifred's health terribly. A new chapter of life opened out before her. She ceased to be the sprightly, lively girl she had once been. She felt herself left alone in the big wide world, with a husband who, as she was now beginning to suspect, had married her for the sake of her money only, while his heart was still fixed upon no one

but Elsie. Poor lonely child: it was a dismal outlook for her. Her soul was sad. She couldn't bear to brazen things out any longer in London—to smile and smile and be inwardly miserable. She must come back now, she said plaintively, to her own people in dear old Suffolk.

To Hugh, this proposition was simply unendurable. He shrank from Whitestrand with a deadly shrinking. Everything about the estate he had made his own was utterly distasteful to him and fraught with horror. The house, the grounds, the garden, the river, above all that tragic, accusing poplar, were so many perpetual reminders of his crime and his punishment. Yet he saw it would be useless to oppose Winifred's wish in such a matter—the whole idea was so simple, so natural. A Squire ought to live on his own land, of course: he ought to occupy the ancestral Hall where his predecessors have dwelt before him for generations. Had not he himself fulminated in his time in the gorgeous periods of the *Morning Telephone* against the crying sin and shame of absenteeism? But if he went there, he could only

go on three conditions. The Hall itself must be remodelled, redecorated, and refurnished throughout, till its own inhabitants would hardly recognize it: the grounds must be replanted in accordance with his own cultivated and refined taste: and last of all—though this he did not venture to mention to Winifred—by fair means or by foul, the Whitestrand poplar—that hateful tree—must be levelled to the soil, and its very place must know it no longer. For the first two conditions he stipulated outright: the third he locked up for the present quietly in the secret recesses of his own bosom.

Winifred, for her part, was not wholly averse, either, to the remodelling of Whitestrand. The house, she admitted, was old-fashioned and dowdy. Its antiquity went back only to the “bad period.” After the æsthetic London drawing-rooms of the Cheyne Row set, she confessed to herself, grudgingly—though not to Hugh—that the blue satin and whitey-gold paint of the dear old place seemed perhaps just a trifle dingy and antiquated. There were tiny cottages at Hampstead and Kensington that Whitestrand

Hall could never reasonably expect to emulate. She didn't object to the alterations, she said, so long as the original Elizabethan front was left scrupulously intact, and no incongruous meddling was allowed with the oaken wainscot and carved ceiling of the Jacobean vestibule. But where, she asked, with sound Suffolk common-sense, was the money for all these improvements to come from? A season of falling rents, and encroaching sea, and shifting sands, and agricultural depression, with Hessian Fly threatening the crops, and obscure bacteria fighting among themselves for possession of the cattle, was surely not the best chosen time in the world for a country gentleman to enlarge and complete and beautify his house in.

"Pooh!" Hugh answered, in one of his heroically sanguine moods, as he sat in the dining-room with his back to the window and the hated poplar, and his face to the ground-plans and estimates upon the table before him. "I mean to go up to town for the season always, and to keep up my journalistic connection in a general way; and in time, no doubt, I shall begin to get work

at the bar also. I shall make friends assiduously with what a playful phrase absurdly describes as "the lower branch of the profession." I shall talk my nicest to every dull solicitor I meet anywhere, and do my politest to the dull solicitor's stupid wife and plain daughters. I'll fetch them ices at other people's At Homes, and shower on them tickets for all the private views we don't care about, and all the first nights at uninteresting theatres. That's the way to advance in the profession. Sooner or later, I'll get on at the bar. Meanwhile, as the estate's fortunately unencumbered, and there's none of that precious nonsense about entail, or remainders, or settlements, or so forth, we can raise the immediate cash for our present need on short mortgages."

"I hate the very name of mortgages," Winifred cried impatiently. "They suggest brokers' men and bailiffs, and bankruptcy and beggary."

"And everything else that begins with a B," Hugh continued, smiling a placid smile to himself, and vaguely reminiscent of "Alice in Wonderland." "Why with a B?" Alice

said musingly.—“Why not?” said the March Hare.—Alice was silent.—“Now, for my own part, I confess, on the contrary, Winifred, to a certain sentimental liking for the mortgage as such, viewed in the abstract. It’s a document intimately connected with the landed interest and the feudal classes; it savours to my mind of broad estates and haughty aristocrats, and lordly rent-rolls and a baronial ancestry. I will admit that I should feel a peculiar pride in my connection with White-strand if I felt I had got it really with a mortgage on it. How proud a moment, to be seized of a mortgage! The poor, the abject, the lowly, and the landless don’t go in heavily for the luxury of mortgages. They pawn their watch, or raise a precarious shilling or two upon the temporary security of Sunday suits, kitchen clocks, and second-hand flat-irons. But a mortgage is an eminently gentlemanly form of impecuniosity. Like gout and the lord-lieutenancy of your shire, it’s incidental to birth and greatness.—Upon my word, I’m not really certain, Winnie, now I come to think upon it, that a gentleman’s house is ever quite complete

without a History of England, a billiard table, and a mortgage. Unencumbered estates suggest Brummagem: they bespeak the vulgar affluence of the *nouveau riche*, who keeps untold gold lying idle at his bankers on purpose to spite the political economists. But a loan of a few thousands, invested with all the glamour of deposited title-deeds, foreclosing, engrossed parchment, and an extremely beautiful and elaborate specimen of that charming dialect, conveyancers' English, carries with it an air of antique respectability and county importance that I should be loth to forego, even if I happened to have the cash in hand otherwise available, for carrying out the necessary improvements."

"But how shall we ever pay it back?" Winifred asked with native feminine caution.

Hugh waved his hands expansively open. When he went in for the sanguine, he did it thoroughly. "One thing at a time, my child," he murmured low. "First borrow; then set your wits to work to look around for a means of repayment.—In the desk at home in London this very moment lies an immortal epic, worth ten thousand pounds if

it's worth a penny, and cheap at the price to a discerning purchaser. Ormuz and Ind are perfect East Ends to it. It teems with Golcondas and Big Bonanzas. In time the slow world must surely discover that this England of ours still encloses a great live poet. The blind and battling must open their eyes and look at last placidly about them. They'll then be glad to buy fifty editions of that divine strain, varying in character from the large paper *édition de luxe* in antique vellum at ten guineas—five hundred numbered copies only printed, and issued to subscribers upon conditions which may be learnt on application at all libraries—to the school selection at popular prices, intended to familiarize the ingenuous youth of this nation with the choicest thoughts of a distinguished and high-minded living author.—Winnie, I'm tired to death of hearing people say when I'm introduced to them: 'Oh, Mr. Massinger, I've often wanted to ask, are you descended from the poet Massinger?' I mean the time to arrive before long when I can answer them plainly with a bold face: 'No, my dear sir, or madam, I am not; but I *am* the poet

Massinger, if you care to be told so.'—When that time comes, we'll pay off the mortgages and build a castle—in Spain or elsewhere—with the balance of our fortune. Meanwhile, we have always the satisfaction of knowing that nothing on earth could be more correct or squirearchical in its way than a genuine mortgage."

"I'm not so sure as I once was, Hugh, that you'll ever make much out of your kind of poetry."

"Of course not, my child; because now I happen to be only your husband. A prophet, we know on the best authority, is not without honour, et cætera, et cætera. But I mean to make my mark yet for all that; ay, and to make money out of it, too, into the bargain."

So, in the end, Winifred's objections were overruled—since this was not a matter upon which that young lady felt strongly—and the money for "improving and developing the estate" having been duly raised by the aid, assistance, instrumentality, or mediation of that fine specimen of conveyancers' English aforesaid, to which Hugh had so touchingly

and professionally alluded, a fashionable architect was invited down from town at once to inspect the Hall and to draw up plans for its renovation as a residential mansion of the most modern pattern.

The fashionable architect, after his kind, performed his work well—and expensively. He spared himself no pains (and Hugh no money) on rendering the Hall a perfect example on a small scale of the best Elizabethan domestic architecture. He destroyed ruthlessly and repaired lavishly. He put mullions to the windows, and pillars to the porch, and moulded ceilings to the chief reception-rooms, and oaken balustrades to either side of the wide old rambling Tudor staircase. He rebuilt whatever Inigo had defaced, and pulled down whatever of vile and shapeless Georgian contractors had stolidly added. He “restored” the building to what it had never before been: a fine squat old-fashioned country mansion of the low wind-swept East Anglian type, a House Beautiful everywhere, without and within, and as unlike as possible to the dingy Hall that Hugh Massinger had seen and mentally discounte-

nanced on the occasion of his first visit to Whitestrand. "You give an architect money enough," says Colonel Silas Lapham in the greatest romance—bar one—in the English language, "and he'll build you a fine house every time." Hugh Massinger gave his architect money enough, or at least credit enough—which comes at first to the same thing—and he got a fine house, as far as the means at his disposal went, on that ugly corner of flat sandy waste at forsaken Whitestrand.

When the building was done and the papering finished, they set about the furnishing proper. And here, Winifred's taste began to clash with Hugh's; for every woman, though she may eschew ground-plans, elevations, and estimates, has at least distinct ideas of her own on the important question of internal decoration. The new Squire was all for oriental hangings, Turkey carpets, Indian durrees, and Persian tiling. But Mrs. Massinger would have none of these heathenish gewgaws, she solemnly declared; her tastes by no means took a Saracenic turn. Mr. Hatherley and the Cheyne Row men

would make fun of her, and call her house Liberty Hall, if she furnished it throughout with such Mussulman absurdities. For her own part, she renounced Liberty and all his works; she eschewed everything east of longitude thirty degrees: inlaid coffee-tables were an abomination in her eyes; pierced Arabic lamps roused no latent enthusiasm: the only real thing in decoration was Morris; and on Morris she pinned her faith unreservedly. She would be utterly utter. She had a Morris carpet and Morris curtains; white ivory paint adorned her lop-sided overmantels, and red De Morgan ware with opalescent hues ranged in long straight rows upon her pigeon-hole cabinets. To Hugh's poetical mind this was all too plaguy modern; out of keeping, he thought, with the wide oaken staircase and the punctilious Elizabethanism of the eminent architect's façade and ceilings. Winifred, however, laughed his marital remonstrances to utter scorn. She hated an upholsterer's house, she said, all furnished alike from end to end with servile adherence to historical correctness. Such puritanical purism was meant for slaves.

Why pretend to be living in Elizabethan England or Louis Quinze France, when we're really vegetating, as we all know, in the marshy wilds of nineteenth-century Suffolk? Let your house reflect your own eclecticism—a very good phrase, picked up from a modish handbook of domestic decoration. She liked a little individuality and lawlessness of purpose. “Your views, you know, Hugh,” she cried, with the *ex cathedrâ* conviction of a woman laying down the law in her own household, “are just the least little bit in the world pedantic. You and your architect want a stiff museum of Elizabethan art. It may be silly of me, but I prefer myself a house to live in.”

“‘The drawing-room does look so perfectly lovely,’ you remember,” Hugh quoted quietly from her own old letters. “‘We’ve done it up exactly as you recommended, with the sage-green plush for the old mantelpiece, and a red Japanese table in the dark corner; and I really think, now I see the effect, your taste’s simply exquisite. But then, you know, what else can you expect from a distinguished poet! You always do everything beauti-

fully!’ Can you recollect, Mrs. Massinger, down the dim abyss of twelve or eighteen months, who wrote those touching words, and to whom she addressed them?”

“Ah, that was all very fine then,” Winifred answered with a pout, arranging Hugh’s Satsuma jars with Japanesque irregularity on the dining-room overmantel. “But you see that was before I’d been about much in London, and noticed how other people smarten up their rooms, and formed my own taste in the matter of decoration. I was then in the frankly unsophisticated state. I’d studied no models. I’d never seen anything beautiful to judge by.”

“You were then Miss Meysey,” her husband answered, with a distantly cold inflexion of voice. “You’re now Mrs. Hugh de Carteret Massinger. It’s that that makes all the difference, you know. The reason there are so many discordant marriages, says Dean Swift, with more truth than politeness, is because young women are so much more occupied in weaving nets than in making cages.”

“I never wove nets for you,” Winifred cried angrily.

"Nor made cages either, it seems," Hugh answered with provoking calmness, as he sauntered off by himself, cigar in hand, into the new smoking-room.

Their intercourse nowadays generally ended in such little amenities. They were beginning to conjugate with alarming frequency that verb to nag, which often succeeds in becoming at last the dominant part of speech in conjugal conversation.

One portion of the house at least, Hugh succeeded in remodelling entirely to his own taste, and that was the bedroom which had once been Elsie's. By throwing out a large round bay-window, mullioned and decorated out of all recognition, and by papering, painting, and refurnishing throughout with ostentatious novelty of design and detail, he so completely altered the appearance of that hateful room that he could hardly know it again himself for the same original square chamber. Moreover, that he might never personally have to enter it, he turned it into the Married Guest's Bedroom. There was the Prophet's Chamber on the Wall for the bachelor visitors—a pretty little attic under

the low eaves, furnished, like the Shunam-mite's, with "a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick;" and there was the Maiden's Bower on the first floor, for the young girls, with its dainty pale-green wardrobe and Morris cabinet; and there was the Blue Room for the prospective heir, whenever that hypothetical young gentleman from parts unknown proceeded to realize himself in actual humanity; so Hugh ventured to erect the remodelled chamber next door to his own into a Married Guest's Room, where he himself need never go to vex his soul with unholy reminiscences. When he could look up at the Hall with a bold face from the grass plot in front, and see no longer that detested square window, with the wistaria festooning itself so luxuriantly round the corners, he felt he might really perhaps after all live at Whitestrand. For the wistaria, too, that grand old climber, with its thick stem, was ruthlessly sacrificed; and in its place on the left of the porch, Hugh planted a fast-growing new-fangled *Ampelopsis*, warranted quickly to drape and mantle the raw stone surfaces, and still further metamor-

phose the front of the Hall from what it had once been—when dead Elsie lived there. All was changed, without and within. The Hall was now fit for a gentleman to dwell in.

Only one eyesore still remained to grieve and annoy him. The Whitestrand poplar yet faced and confronted him wherever he looked. It turned him sick. It poisoned Suffolk for him. The poplar must go! He could never endure it. Life would indeed be a living death, in sight for ever of that detested and grinning memorial. For it grinned at him often from the gnarled and hollow trunk. A human face seemed to laugh out upon him from its shapeless boles—a human face, fiendish in its joy, with a carbuncled nose and grinning mouth. He hated to see it, it grinned so hideously. So he set his wits to work to devise a way for getting rid of the poplar, root and branch, without unnecessarily angering Winifred.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

REHEARSAL.

MEANWHILE, when the house was all finished and decorated throughout, Hugh turned his thoughts once more, on fame intent, to his great forthcoming volume of verses. Since he married Winifred, he had published little, eschewing journalism and such small tasks as unworthy the dignity of accomplished squire-dom ; but he had been working hard from time to time at polishing and repolishing his *magnum opus*, " A Life's Philosophy "—a lengthy poem in a metre of his own, more or less novel, and embodying a number of moral reflections, more or less trite, on the youth, adolescence, maturity, and decrepitude of the human subject. It exactly suited Mr. Matthew Arnold's well-known definition, being, in fact, an exhaustive criticism of life,

as Hugh Massinger himself had found it. He meant to print it in time for the autumn book-season. It was the great stake of his life, and he was confident of success. He had worked it up with ceaseless toil to what seemed to himself the highest possible pitch of artistic handicraft; and he rolled his own sonorous rhymes over and over again with infinite satisfaction upon his literary palate, pronouncing them all, on impartial survey, of most excellent flavour. Nothing in life, indeed, can be more deceptive than the poetaster's confidence in his own productions. He mistakes familiarity for smoothness of ring, and a practised hand for genius and originality. It is his fate always to find his own lines absolutely perfect; in which cheerful personal creed the rest of the world mostly fails altogether to agree with him.

In such a self-congratulatory and hopeful mood, Hugh sat one morning in the new drawing-room, holding a quire of closely written sermon-paper stitched together in his hand, and gazing affectionately with parental pride at his last-born stanzas. Winifred had only returned yesterday from a shopping

expedition up to town, and was idling away a day in rest and repair after her unwonted exertion among the crowded bazaars of the modern Bagdad. So Hugh leaned back in his chair at his ease, and, seized with the sudden thirst for an audience, began to pour forth in her ear in his rotund manner the final finished introductory prelude to his "Life's Philosophy." His wife, propped up on the pillows of the sofa and lolling carelessly, listened and smiled as he read and read, with somewhat sceptical though polite indifference.

"Let me see, where had I got to?" Hugh went on once, after one of her frequent and trying critical interruptions. "You put me out so, Winnie, with your constant fault-finding! I can't recollect how far I'd read to you."

"'Begotten unawares:' now go ahead," Winifred answered carelessly—as carelessly as though it was some other fellow's poems he had been pouring forth to her.

"'Or bastard offspring of unconscious nature, Begotten unawares,'" Hugh repeated pompously, looking back with a loving eye at

his much-admired manuscript. "Now listen to the next good bit, Winifred; it's really impressive.—

" XXXII.

" When chaos slowly set to sun or planet,
And molten masses hardened into earth;
When primal force wrought out on sea and granite
The wondrous miracle of living birth;
Did mightier Mind, in clouds of glory hidden,
Breathe power through its limbs to feel and know,
Or sentience spring, spontaneous and unbidden,
With feeble steps and slow?

" XXXIII.

" Are sense and thought but parasites of being?
Did Nature mould our limbs to act and move,
But some strange chance endow our eyes with seeing,
Our nerves with feeling, and our hearts with love?
Since all alone we stand, alone discerning
Sorrow from joy, self from the things without;
While blind fate tramples on the spirit's yearning,
And floods our souls with doubt.

" XXXIV.

" This very tree, whose life is our life's sister,
We know not if the ichor in her veins
Thrill with fierce joy when April dews have kissed
her,
Or shrink in anguish from October rains;
We search the mighty world above and under,
Yet nowhere find the soul we fain would find;
Speech in the hollow rumbling of the thunder,
Words in the whispering wind.

"XXXV.

"We yearn for brotherhood with lake and mountain,
Our conscious soul seeks conscious sympathy;
Nymphs in the coppice, Naiads in the fountain,
Gods on the craggy height or roaring sea.
We find but soulless sequences of matter;
Fact linked to fact in adamantine rods;
Eternal bonds of former sense and latter;
Dead laws for living gods.

"There, Winifred, what do you say to that now? Isn't that calculated to take the wind out of some of these pretentious fellows' sails? What do you think of it?"

"Think?" Winifred answered, pursing up her lips into an expression of the utmost professional connoisseurship. "I think 'granite' doesn't rhyme in the English language with 'planet;' and I consider 'sentience' is a horribly prosaic word of its sort to introduce into serious poetry.—What's that stuff about liquor too? 'We know not if the liquor in her something.' I don't like 'liquor.' It's not good: bar-room English, only fit for a public-house production."

"I didn't say 'liquor,'" Hugh cried indignantly. "I said 'ichor,' which of course is a very different matter. 'We know not if the ichor in her veins.' Ichor's the blood of

the gods in Homer. That's the worst of reading these things to women : classical allusion's an utter blank to them.—If you've got nothing better than that to object, have the kindness, please, not to interrupt me."

Winifred closed her lips with a sharp snap ; while Hugh went on, nothing abashed, with the same sonorous metre-marked mouthing :

"XXXVI.

" They care not any whit for pain or pleasure
That seem to men the sum and end of all.
Dumb force and barren number are their measure :
What can be, shall be, though the great world fall.
They take no heed of man, or man's deserving,
Reck not what happy lives they make, or mar,
Work out their fatal will, unswerved, unswerving,
And know what they are.

" Now, what do you say to that, Winifred ? Isn't it just hunky ? "

" I don't like interrupting," Winifred snapped out savagely. " You told me not to interrupt, except for a good and sufficient reason."

" Well, don't be nasty," Hugh put in, half smiling. " This is business, you know—a matter of public appreciation—and I want your criticism : it all means money. Criticism

from anybody, no matter whom, is always worth at least something."

"Oh, thank you, *so* much. That *is* polite of you. Then if you want criticism, no matter from whom, I should say I fail to perceive, myself, the precise difference you mean to suggest between the two adjectives 'unswerved' and 'unswerving.' To the untutored intelligence of a mere woman, to whom classical allusion's an utter blank, they seem to say exactly the same thing twice over."

"No, no," Hugh answered, getting warm in self-defence. "'Unswerved' is passive; 'unswerving' is active, or at least middle: the one means that they swerve themselves; the other, that somebody or something else swerves them."

"You do violence to the genius of the English language," Winifred remarked curtly. "I may not be acquainted with Latin and Greek, but I talk at least my mother-tongue. Are you going to print nothing but this great, long, dreary incomprehensible 'Life's Philosophy' in your new volume?"

"I shall make it up mainly with that,"

Hugh answered, crest-fallen, at so obvious a failure favourably to impress the domestic critic. "But I shall also eke out the title-piece with a lot of stray occasional verses—the 'Funeral Ode for Gambetta,' for example, and plenty of others that I haven't read you. Some of them seem to me tolerably successful." He was growing modest before the face of her unflinching criticism.

"Read me 'Gambetta,'" Winifred said with quiet imperiousness. "I'll see if I like that any better than all this foolish maundering Philosophy."

Hugh turned over his papers for the piece "by request," and after some searching among quires and sheets, came at last upon a clean-written copy of his immortal threnody. He began reading out the lugubrious lines in a sufficiently grandiose and sepulchral voice. Winifred listened with careless attention, as to a matter little worthy her sublime consideration. Hugh cleared his throat and rang out magniloquently :

"She sits once more upon her ancient throne,
The fair Republic of our steadfast vows :
A Phrygian bonnet binds her queenly brows ;
Athwart her neck her knotted hair is blown.

A hundred cities nestle in her lap,
Girt round their stately locks with mural crowns :
The folds of her imperial robe enwrap
A thousand lesser towns."

" ' Mural crowns ' is good," Winifred murmured satirically : " it reminds one so vividly of the stone statues in the Place de la Concorde."

Hugh took no notice of her intercalary criticism. He went on with ten or twelve stanzas more of the same bombastic, would-be sublime character, and wound up at last in thunderous tones with a prophetic outburst as to the imagined career of some future Gambetta—himself possibly :

" He still shall guide us toward the distant goal ;
Calm with unerring tact our weak alarms ;
Train all our youth in skill of manly arms,
And knit our sires in unity of soul :
Till bursting iron bars and gates of brass
Our own Republic stretch her arm again
To raise the weeping daughters of Alsace,
And lead thee home, Lorraine.

" Well, what do you think of *that*, Winnie?" he asked at last triumphantly, with the air of a man who has trotted out his best war-horse for public inspection and has no fear of the effect he is producing.

“Think?” Winifred answered. “Why, I think, Hugh, that if Swinburne had never written his Ode to Victor Hugo, *you* would never have written that Funeral March for your precious Gambetta.”

Hugh bit his lip in bitter silence. The criticism was many times worse than harsh: it was true; and he knew it. But a truthful critic is the most galling of all things.

“Well, surely, Winifred,” he cried at last, after a long pause, “you think those other lines good, don’t you?”—

“And when like some fierce whirlwind through the
land

The wrathful Teuton swept, he only dared
To hope and act when every heart and hand,
But his alone, despaired.”

“My dear Hugh,” Winifred answered candidly, “don’t you see in your own heart that all this sort of thing may be very well in its own way, but it isn’t original—it isn’t inspiration; it isn’t the true sacred fire: it’s only an echo. Echoes do admirably for the young beginner; but in a man of your age—for you’re getting on now—we expect something native and idiosyncratic.—I think Mr.

Hatherley called it idiosyncratic.—You know Mr. Hatherley said to me once you would never be a poet. You have too good a memory. ‘Whenever Massinger sits down at his desk to write about anything,’ he said in his quiet way, ‘he remembers such a perfect flood of excellent things other people have written about the same subject, that he’s absolutely incapable of originality.’ And the more I see of your poetry, dear, the more do I see that Mr. Hatherley was right—right beyond question. You’re clever enough, but you know you’re not original.”

Hugh answered her never a single word. To such a knock-down blow as that, any answer at all is clearly impossible. He only muttered something very low to himself about casting one’s pearls before some creature inaudible.

Presently, Winifred spoke again. “Let’s go out,” she said, rising from the sofa, “and sit by the sea on the roots of the poplar.”

At the word, Hugh flung down the manuscript in a heap on the ground with a stronger expression than Winifred had ever before heard fall from his lips. “I hate the

poplar!" he said angrily; "I detest the poplar! I won't have the poplar! Nothing on earth will induce me to sit by the poplar!"

"How cross you are!" Winifred cried with a frown. "You jump at me as if you'd snap my head off! And all just because I didn't like your verses.—Very well then; I'll go and sit there alone.—I can amuse myself, fortunately, without your help. I've got Mr. Hatherley's clever article in this month's *Contemporary*."

That evening, as they sat together silently in the drawing-room, Winifred engaged in the feminine amusement of casting admiring glances at her own walls, and Hugh poring deep over a serious-looking book, Winifred glanced over at him suddenly with a sigh, and murmured half aloud: "After all, really I don't think much of it."

"Much of what?" Hugh asked, still bending over the book he was anxiously consulting.

"Why, of that gourd I brought home from town yesterday. You know Mrs. Walpole's got a gourd in her drawing-room; and every time I went into the vicarage I said to

myself: 'Oh, how lovely it is! How exquisite! How foreign-looking! If only I had a gourd like that, now, I think life would be really endurable. It gives the last touch of art to the picture. Our new drawing-room would look just perfection with such a gourd as hers to finish the wall with.' Well, I saw the exact counterpart of that very gourd the day before yesterday at a shop in Bond Street. I bought it, and brought it home with exceeding great joy. I thought I should then be quite happy. I hung it up on the wall to try, this morning. And sitting here all evening, looking at it with my head first on one side and then on the other, I've said to myself a thousand times over: 'It doesn't look one bit like Mrs. Walpole's. After all, I don't know that I'm so much happier, now I've got it, than I was before I had a gourd of my own at all to look at.'"

Hugh groaned. The unconscious allegory was far too obvious in its application not to sink into the very depths of his soul. He turned back to his book, and sighed inwardly to think for what a feeble, unsatisfactory shadow of a gourd he had sacrificed his

own life—not to speak of Winifred's and Elsie's.

By-and-by Winifred rose and crossed the room. "What's that you're studying so intently?" she asked, with a suspicious glance at the book in his fingers.

Hugh hesitated, and seemed half inclined for a moment to shut the book with a bang and hide it away from her. Then he made up his mind with a fresh resolve to brazen it out. "Gordon's 'Electricity and Magnetism,' he answered quietly, as unabashed as possible, holding the volume half-closed with his forefinger at the page he had just hunted up. "I'm—I'm interested at present to some extent in the subject of electricity. I'm thinking of getting it up a little."

Winifred took the book from his hand, wondering, with a masterful air of perfect authority. He yielded like a lamb. On immaterial questions it was his policy not to resist her. She turned to the page where his finger had rested and ran it down lightly with her quick eye. The key-words showed in some degree at what it was driving: "Franklin's Experiment"—"Means of Col-

lection"—"Theory of Lightning Rods"—"Ruhmkorff's Coils"—"Drawing down Electric Discharges from the Clouds."—Why, what was all this? She turned round to him inquiringly. Hugh shuffled in an uneasy way in his chair. The husband who shuffles betrays his cause. "We must put up conductors, Winnie," he said hesitatingly, with a hot face, "to protect those new gables at the east wing.—It's dangerous to leave the house so exposed. I'll order them down from London to-morrow."

"Conductors! Fiddlesticks!" Winifred answered in a breath, with wifely promptitude. "Lightning never hurt the house yet, and it's not going to begin hurting it now, just because an Immortal Poet with a fad for electricity has come to live and compose at Whitestrand. If anything, it ought to go the other way. Bards, you know, are exempt from thunderbolts. Didn't you read me the lines yourself, 'God's lightnings spared, they said, Alone the holier head, Whose laurels screened it,' or something to that effect? *You're* all right, you see. Poets can never get struck, I fancy."

"But 'Mr. Hatherley said to me once you would never be a poet,'" Hugh repeated with a smile, exactly mimicking Winifred's querulous little voice and manner. "As my own wife doesn't consider me a poet, Winifred, I shall venture to do as I like myself about my private property."

Winifred took up a bedroom candle and lighted it quietly without a word. Then she went up to muse in her own bedroom over her new gourd and other disillusionments.

As soon as she was gone, Hugh rose from his chair and walked slowly into his own study. Gordon's "Electricity" was still in his hand, and his finger pointed to that incriminating passage. He sat down at the sloping desk and wrote a short note to a well-known firm of scientific instrument makers whose address he had copied a week before from the advertisement sheet of *Nature*.

"Whitestrاند Hall, Almundham, Suffolk.

"GENTLEMEN,

"Please forward me to the above address, at your earliest convenience, your most powerful form of Ruhmkorff Induction

Coil, with secondary wires attached, for which cheque will be sent in full on receipt of invoice or retail price-list.

“Faithfully yours,

“HUGH MASSINGER.”

As he rose from the desk, he glanced half involuntarily out of the study window. It pointed south. The moon was shining full on the water. That hateful poplar stared him straight in the face, as tall and gaunt and immovable as ever. On its roots, a woman in a white dress was standing, looking out over the angry sea, as Elsie had stood, for the twinkling of an eye, on that terrible evening when he lost her for ever. One second, the sight sent a shiver through his frame, then he laughed to himself, the next, for his groundless terror. How childish! How infantile! It was the gardener's wife, in her light print frock, looking out to sea for her boy's smack, overdue, no doubt—for Charlie was a fisherman.—But it was intolerable that he, the Squire of Whitestrand, should be subjected to such horrible turns as these.—He shook his fist angrily at the

offending tree. "You shall pay for it, my friend," he muttered low but hoarse between his clenched teeth. "You shan't have many more chances of frightening me!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN.

DURING the whole of the next week, the Squire and a strange artisan, whom he had specially imported by rail from London, went much about together by day and night through the grounds at Whitestrand. A certain air of mystery hung over their joint proceedings. The strange artisan was a skilled workman in the engineering line, he told the people at the Fisherman's Rest, where he had taken a bed for his stay in the village; and indeed sundry books in his kit bore out the statement—weird books of a scientific and diagrammatic character, chock-full of formulæ in Greek lettering, which seemed not unlikely to be connected with hydrostatics, dynamics, trigonometry, and mechanics, or any other equally abstruse and

uncanny subject, not wholly alien to necromancy and witchcraft. It was held at Whitestrand by those best able to form an opinion in such dark questions, that the new importation was "summat in the electric way;" and it was certainly matter of plain fact, patent to all observers equally, that he did in very truth fix up an elaborate lightning-conductor of the latest pattern to the newly-thrown-out gable-end at what had once been Elsie's window. It was Elsie's window still to Hugh: let him twist it and turn it and alter it as he would, he feared it would never, never cease to be Elsie's window.

But in the domain at large, the intelligent artisan with the engineering air, who was surmised to be "summat in the electric way," carefully examined, under Hugh's directions, many parts of the grounds of Whitestrand. Squire was going to lay out the garden and terrace afresh, the servants conjectured in their own society: one or two of them, exceedingly modern in their views, even opined in an off-hand fashion that he must be bent on laying electric lights on. Conservative in most things to the back-bone,

the servants bestowed the meed of their hearty approval on the electric light: it saves so much in trimming and cleaning. Lamps are the bugbear of big country houses: electricity, on the other hand, needs no tending. It was near the poplar that Squire was going to put his installation, as they call the arrangement in our latter-day jargon; and he was going to drive it, rumour remarked, by a tidal outfall. What a tidal outfall might be, or how it could work in lighting the Hall, nobody knew; but the intelligent artisan had let the words drop casually in the course of conversation; and the Fisherman's Rest snapped them up at once, and retailed them freely with profound gusto to all after-comers.

Still, it was a curious fact in its own way that the installation appeared to progress most easily when nobody happened to be looking on, and that the skilled workman in the engineering line generally stood with his hands in his pockets, surveying his handicraft with languid interest, whenever anybody from the village or the Hall lounged up by his side to inspect or wonder at it.

More curious still was another small fact, known to nobody but the skilled workman *in propriâ personâ*, that four small casks of petroleum from a London store were stowed away, by Hugh Massinger's orders, under the very roots of the big poplar; and that by their side lay a queer apparatus, connected apparently in some remote way with electric lighting.

The Squire himself, however, made no secret of his own personal and private intentions to the London workman. He paid the man well, and he exacted silence. That was all. But he explained precisely in plain terms what it was that he wanted done. The tree was an eyesore to him, he said, with his usual frankness—Hugh was always frank whenever possible—but his wife, for sentimental reasons, had a special fancy for it. He wanted to get rid of it, therefore, in the least obtrusive way he could easily manage. This was the least obtrusive way. So *this* was what he required done with it. The London workman nodded his head, pocketed his pay, looked unconcerned, and held his tongue with trained fidelity. It was none of

his business to pry into any employer's motives. Enough for him to take his orders and to carry them out faithfully to the very letter. The job was odd: an odd job is always interesting. He hoped the experiment might prove successful.

The Whitestrand labourers, who passed by the poplar and the London workman, time and again, with a jerky nod and their pipes turned downward, never noticed a certain slender unobtrusive copper wire which the strange artisan fastened one evening, in the gray dusk, right up the stem and boles of the big tree to a round knob on the very summit. The wire, however, as its fixer knew, ran down to a large deal box well buried in the ground, which bore outside a green label, "Ruhmkorff Induction Coil, Elliott's Patent." The wire and coil terminated in a pile close to the four full petroleum barrels. When the London workman had securely laid the entire apparatus, undisturbed by loungers, he reported adversely, with great solemnity, on the tidal outfall and electric light scheme to Hugh Massinger. No sufficient power for the purpose existed

in the river. This adverse report was orally delivered in the front vestibule of Whitestrand Hall; and it was also delivered with sedulous care—as per orders received—in Mrs. Massinger's own presence. When the London workman went out again after making his carefully worded statement, he went out clinking a coin of the realm or two in his trousers' pocket, and with his tongue stuck, somewhat unbecomingly, in his right cheek, as who should pride himself on the successful outwitting of an innocent fellow-creature. He had done the work he was paid for, and he had done it well. But he thought to himself, as he went his way rejoicing, that the Squire of Whitestrand must be very well held in hand indeed by that small pale lady, if he had to take so many cunning precautions in secret beforehand when he wanted to get rid of a single tree that offended his eye in his own gardens.

The plot was all well laid now. Hugh had nothing further left to do but to possess his soul in patience against the next thunderstorm. He had not very long to wait. Before the month was out, a thunderstorm did indeed

burst in full force over Whitestrand and its neighbourhood—one of those terrible and destructive east coast electric displays which invariably leave their broad mark behind them. For along the low, flat, monotonous East Anglian shore, where hills are unknown and big trees rare, the lightning almost inevitably singles out for its onslaught some aspiring piece of man's handiwork—some church steeple, some castle keep, the turrets on some tall and isolated manor-house, the vane above some ancient castellated gateway.

The reason for this is not far to seek. In hilly countries the hills and trees act as natural lightning-conductors, or rather as decoys to draw aside the fire from heaven from the towns or farmhouses that nestle far below among the glens and valleys. But in wide level plains, where all alike is flat and low-lying, human architecture forms for the most part the one salient point in the landscape for lightning to attack: every church or tower with its battlements and lanterns stands in the place of the polished knobs on an electric machine, and draws down upon itself with unerring certainty the destructive

bolt from the overcharged clouds. Owing to this cause, the thunderstorms of East Anglia are the most appalling and destructive in their concrete results of any in England. The laden clouds, big with electric energy, hang low and dark above one's very head, and let loose their accumulated store of vivid flashes in the exact midst of towns and villages.

This particular thunderstorm, as chance would have it, came late at night, after three sultry days of close weather, when big black masses were just beginning to gather in vast battalions over the German Ocean; and it let loose at last its fierce artillery in terrible volleys right over the village and grounds of Whitestrand. Hugh Massinger was the first at the Hall to observe from afar the distant flash, before the thunder had made itself audible in their ears. A pale light to westward, in the direction of Snade, attracted, as he read, his passing attention. "By Jove!" he cried, rising with a yawn from his chair, and laying down the manuscript of "A Life's Philosophy," which he was languidly correcting in its later stanzas, "that's something like lightning, Winifred! Over Snade way,

apparently. I wonder if it's going to drift towards us?—Whew—what a clap! It's precious near. I expect we shall catch it ourselves shortly.”

The clouds rolled up with extraordinary rapidity, and the claps came fast and thick and nearer. Winifred cowered down on the sofa in terror. She dreaded thunder; but she was too proud to confess what she would nevertheless have given worlds to do—hide her frightened little head with sobs and tears in its old place upon Hugh's shoulder. “It's coming this way,” she cried nervously after a while. “That last flash must have been awfully near us.”

Even as she spoke, a terrific volley seemed to burst all at once right over their heads and shake the house with its irresistible majesty. Winifred buried her face deep in the cushions. “Oh, Hugh,” she cried in a terrified tone, “this is awful—awful!”

Much as he longed to look out of the window, Hugh could not resist that unspoken appeal. He drew up the blind hastily to its full height, so that he might see out to watch the success of his deep-laid stratagem; then

he hurried over with real tenderness to Winifred's side. He drew his arm round her and soothed her with his hand, and laid her poor throbbing aching head with a lover's caress upon his own broad bosom. Winifred nestled close to him with a sigh of relief. The nearness of danger, real or imagined, rouses all the most ingrained and profound of our virile feelings. The instinct of protection for the woman and the child comes over even bad men at such moments of doubt with irresistible might and majesty. Small differences or tiffs are forgotten and forgiven: the woman clings naturally in her feminine weakness to the strong man in his primary aspect as comforter and protector. Between Hugh and Winifred the estrangement as yet was but vague and unacknowledged. Had it yawned far wider, had it sunk far deeper, the awe and terror of that supreme moment would amply have sufficed to bridge it over, at least while the orgy of the thunderstorm lasted.

For next instant a sheet of liquid flame seemed to surround and engulf the whole house at once in its white embrace. The

world became for the twinkling of an eye one surging flood of vivid fire, one roar and crash and sea of deafening tumult. Winifred buried her face deeper than ever on Hugh's shoulder, and put up both her small hands to her tingling ears, to crush if possible the hideous roar out. But the light and sound seemed to penetrate everything: she was aware of them keenly through her very bones and nerves and marrow; her entire being appeared as if pervaded and overwhelmed with the horror of the lightning. In another moment all was over, and she was conscious only of an abiding awe, a deep-seated after-glow of alarm and terror. But Hugh had started up from the sofa now, both his hands clasped hard in front of his breast, and was gazing wildly out of the big bow-window, and lifting up his voice in a paroxysm of excitement. "It's hit the poplar!" he cried. "It's hit the poplar! It must be terribly near, Winnie! It's hit the poplar!"

Winifred opened her eyes with an effort, and saw him standing there, as if spellbound, by the window. She dared not get up and

come any nearer the front of the room, but, raising her eyes, she saw from where she sat, or rather crouched, that the poplar stood out, one living mass of rampant flame, a flaring beacon, from top to bottom. The petroleum, ignited and raised to flashing-point by the fire which the induction coil had drawn down from heaven, gave off its blazing vapour in huge rolling sheets and forked tongues of flame, which licked up the crackling branches of the dry old tree from base to summit like so much touchwood. The poplar rose now one solid column of crimson fire. The red glow deepened and widened from moment to moment. Even the drenching rain that followed the thunder-clap seemed powerless to check that frantic onslaught. The fire leaped and danced through the tall straight boughs with mad exultation, hissing out its defiance to the big round drops which burst off into tiny balls of steam before they could reach the red-hot trunk and snapping branches. Even left to itself, the poplar, once ignited, would have burnt to the ground with startling rapidity ; for its core was dry and light as tinder, its wood was eaten

through by innumerable worm-holes, and the hollow centre of mouldering dry-rot, where children had loved to play at Hide-and-seek, acted now like a roaring chimney flue, with a fierce draught that carried up the circling eddies of smoke and flame in mad career to the topmost branches. But the fumes of the petroleum, rendered instantly gaseous by the electric heat, made the work of destruction still more instantaneous, terrible, and complete than it would have proved if left to unaided nature. The very atmosphere resolved itself into one rolling pillar of fluid flame. The tree seemed enveloped in a shroud of fire. All human effort must be powerless to resist it. The poplar dissolved almost as if by magic with a wild rapidity into its prime elements.

A man must be a man come what may. Hugh leaped towards the window and flung it open wildly. "I must go!" he cried. "Ring the bell for the servants." The savage glee in his voice was well repressed. His enemy was low, laid prone at his feet, but he would at least pretend to some spark of magnanimity. "We must get out the

hose!" he exclaimed. "We must try to save it!"

Winifred clung to his arm in horror. "Let it burn down, Hugh!" she cried. "Who cares for the poplar? I'd sooner ten thousand poplars burned to the ground than that you should venture out on such an evening!"

Her hand on his arm thrilled through him with horror. Her words stung him with a sense of his meanness. Something very like a touch of remorse came over his spirit. He stooped down and kissed her tenderly. The next flash struck over towards the sandhills. The thunder was rolling gradually seaward.

Hugh slept but little that eventful night; his mind addressed itself with feverish eagerness to so many hard and doubtful questions. He tossed and turned and asked himself ten thousand times over—was the tree burnt through—burnt down to the ground? Were the roots and trunk consumed beyond hope—or rather beyond fear—of ultimate recovery? Was the hateful poplar really done for? Would any trace remain of the barrels that had held the tell-tale petroleum? any relic be left of the Ruhmkorff Induction Coil?

What jot or tittle of the evidence of design would now survive to betray and convict him? What ground for reasonable suspicion would Winifred see that the fire was not wholly the result of accident?

But when next morning's light dawned and the sun arose upon the scene of conflagration, Hugh saw at a glance that all his fears had indeed been wholly and utterly groundless. The poplar was as though it had never existed. A bare black patch by the mouth of the Char, covered with ash and dust and cinder, alone marked the spot where the famous tree had once stood. The very roots were burned deep into the ground. The petroleum had done its duty bravely. Not a trace of design could be observed anywhere. The Ruhmkorff Induction Coil had melted into air. Nobody ever so much as dreamed that human handicraft had art or part in the burning of the celebrated Whitestrand poplar. The *Times* gave it a line of passing regret; and the Trinity House deleted it with pains as a lost landmark from their sailing directions.

Hugh set his workmen instantly to stub up

the roots. And Winifred, gazing mournfully next day at the ruins, observed with a sigh : “ You never liked the dear old tree, Hugh ; and it seems as if fate had interposed in your favour to destroy it. I’m sorry it’s gone ; but I’d sacrifice a hundred such trees any day to have you as kind to me as you were last evening.”

The saying smote Hugh’s heart sore. He played nervously with the button of his coat. “ I wish you could have kept it, Winnie,” he said not unkindly. “ But it’s not my fault.— And I bear no malice. I’ll even forgive you for telling me I’d never make a poet ; though that, you’ll admit, was a hard saying. I think, my child, if you don’t mind, I’ll ask Hatherley down next week to visit us.— There’s nothing like adverse opinion to improve one’s work. Hatherley’s opinion is more than adverse. I’d like his criticism on ‘ A. Life’s Philosophy ’ before I rush into print at last with the greatest and deepest work of my lifetime.”

That same evening, as it was growing dusk, Warren Relf and Potts, navigating the *Mud-Turtle* around by sea from Yarmouth Roads,

put in for the night to the Char at Whitestrand. They meant to lie by for a Sunday in the estuary, and walk across the fields, if the day proved fine, to service at Snade. As they approached the mouth they looked about in vain for the familiar landmark. At first they could hardly believe their eyes: to men who knew the east coast well, the disappearance of the Whitestrand poplar from the world seemed almost as incredible as the sudden removal of the Bass Rock or the Pillars of Hercules. Nobody would ever dream of cutting down that glory of Suffolk, that time-honoured sea-mark. But as they strained their eyes through the deepening gloom, the stern logic of facts left them at last no further room for syllogistic reasoning or *à priori* scepticism. The Whitestrand poplar was really gone. Not a stump even remained as its relic or its monument.

They drove the yawl close under the shore. The current was setting out stronger than ever, and eddying back against the base of the roots with a fierce and eager swirling movement. Warren Relf looked over the bank in doubt at the charred and blackened soil beside

it. He knew in a second exactly what had happened. "Massinger has burned down the poplar, Potts," he cried aloud. He did not add, "because it stood upon the very spot where Elsie Challoner threw herself over." But he knew it was so. They turned the yawl up stream once more. Then Warren Relf murmured in a low voice, more than half to himself, but in solemn accents: "So much the worse in the end for Whitestrand."

All the way up to the Fisherman's Rest he repeated again and again below his breath: "So much the worse in the end for Whitestrand."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BARD IN HARNESS.

“ I NEVER felt more astonished in my life,” Hatherley remarked one day some weeks later to a chosen circle at the Cheyne Row Club, “ than I felt on the very first morning of my visit to Whitestrand. Talk about being driven by a lady, indeed ! Why, that frail little woman’s got the Bard in harness, as right and as tight as if he were a respectable cheesemonger.—What on earth do you think happened ? As the Divine Singer and I were starting out, stick in hand, for a peregrination of the estate—or what there is left of it—if that perky little atomy didn’t poke her fuzzy, tow-bewigged head out of the dining-room window, and call out in the most matter-of-fact tone possible : ‘ Hugh, if you’re going to the village to-day, mind you don’t

forget to bring me back three kippered herrings!’—‘Three *what?*’ said I, scarcely believing my ears.—‘Three kippered herrings,’ that unblushing little minx repeated in an audible voice, wholly unabashed at the absurdity of her request.—‘Well,’ said I, in a fever of surprise, ‘it may be all right when you’ve got them well in hand, you know; but you’ll admit, Mrs. Massinger, that’s not the use to which we generally put immortal minstrels!’—‘Oh, but this is such a very mild specimen of the genus, though!’ Mrs. Massinger answered, laughing carelessly.—I looked at the Bard with tremulous awe, expecting to see the angry fire in his cold gray eye flashing forth like the leven bolt from heaven to scath and consume her. Not a bit of it. Nary scath! The Immortal Singer merely took out his tablets from his waistcoat pocket and made a note of the absurd commission. And when we came home again an hour afterwards, I solemnly assure you he was carrying those three identical kippered herrings, wrapped up in a sheet of dirty newspaper, in the very hand that wrote ‘The Death of Alaric.’—It’s too

surprising. The Bard's done for. His life is finished. There the Man stops. The Husband and Father may drag out a wretched domestic existence yet for another twenty years. But the Man is dead, hopelessly dead. Julius Cæsar himself's not more utterly defunct. That girl has extinguished him."

"Are there any children, then?" one of the chosen circle put in casually.

"Children! No. Bar twins, the plural would surely be premature, so far. There was a child born just after old Mrs. Meysey's death, I believe; but it came to nothing—a mere abortive attempt at a son and heir—and left the mother a poor wreck, her own miserable faded photograph. She was a nice little girl enough, in her small way, when she was here in town; amusing and sprightly; but the Bard has done for her, as she's done for the Bard. It's a mutual annihilation society, like Stevenson's Suicide Club on a more private platform.—He seems to have crushed all the giddy girlishness out of her. The fact is, this is a case of incompatibility of disposition—for which cause I believe you can get a divorce in Illinois or some other

enlightened Far Western community. You can't stop three days at Whitestrand without feeling there's a skeleton in the house somewhere!"

The skeleton in the house, long carefully confined to its native cupboard, had indeed begun to perambulate the Hall in open daylight during the brief period of Hatherley's visit. He reached the newly remodelled home just in time to dress for dinner. When he descended to the ill-lighted drawing-room, five minutes late—Whitestrand could boast no native gas-supply, and candles are expensive—he gave his arm with a sense of solemn obligation to poor dark-clad Winifred. Mrs. Massinger was indeed altered—sadly altered. Three painful losses in quick succession had told upon that slender pale young wife. She showed her paleness in her deep black dress: colours suited Winifred: in mourning, she was hardly even pretty. The little "arrangement in pink and white" had faded almost into white alone: the pinkness had proved a fleeting pigment: she was not warranted fast colours. But Hatherley did

his best with innate gallantry not to notice the change. Fresh from town, crammed with the last good things of the Cheyne Row and Mrs. Bouverie Barton's Wednesday evenings, he tried hard with conscientious efforts to keep the conversation from flagging visibly. At first he succeeded with creditable skill; and Hugh, looking across at his wife with a curious smile, said in a tone of genuine pleasure: "How delightful it is, after all, Winnie, to get a hold of somebody, direct from the real live world of London, in the midst of our fossilized antediluvian White-strand society!—I declare, Hatherley, it does one's heart good, like champagne, to listen to you. A breath of Bohemia blows across Suffolk the moment you arrive. Poor drowsy, somnolent, petrified Suffolk! 'Silly Suffolk,' even the aborigines themselves call it. It's catching, too. I'm almost beginning to fall asleep myself, by force of example."

At the words, Winifred fired up in defence of her native county. "I'm sure, Hugh," she said with some asperity, "I don't know why you're always trying to run down Suffolk! If you didn't like us, you should have avoided

the shire; you should have carried your respected presence elsewhere. Suffolk never invited you to honour it with your suffrages. You came and settled here of your own free will. And who could be nicer or more cultivated, if it comes to that, than some of our Suffolk aborigines, as you call them? Dear old Mrs. Walpole at the vicarage, for example."

Hugh balanced an olive on the end of his fork. "An amiable old Hecuba," he answered provokingly. "What's Hecuba to me, or I to Hecuba? Her latest dates are about the period of the siege of Troy, or, to be more precisely accurate, the year 1850. She's extremely well read, I grant you that, in Bulwer Lytton and the poets of the Regency. She adores Cowper, and considers Voltaire a most dangerous writer. She has even heard of Bismarck and Bulgaria; and she understands that a young man named Swinburne has lately published some very objectionable and unwholesome verses, not suited to the cheek of the young person.—The idea of sticking *me* down with people like that, who never read a line of Browning

in their lives, and ask if Mr. William Morris 'the upholsterer,' who furnished and decorated our poor little drawing-room, is really a brother of that eccentric and rather heterodox preacher!—My dear Hatherley, when *you* come down, I feel like a man who has breathed fresh air on some high mountain—stimulated and invigorated. You palpitate with actuality. Down here, we stagnate in the seventeenth century."

Winifred bit her lip with vexation, but said nothing. It was evident the subject was an unpleasant one to her. But *she* at least would not trot out the skeleton. Women are all for due concealment of your dirty linen. It is men who insist on washing it in public.

Next morning—the morning of the kippered herring adventure—Hugh showed Hatherley round the Whitestrand estate. Hatherley himself was not, to say the truth, in the best of humours. Mrs. Massinger was dull and not what she used to be: she obviously resented his bright London gossip, as throwing into stronger and clearer relief the innate stupidity of her ancestral Suffolk. The

breakfast was bad; the coffee sloppy; and the dishes suggested too obvious reminiscences of the joints and *entrées* at last night's dinner. Clearly, the Massingers were struggling hard to keep up appearances on an insufficient income. They were stretching their means much too thin. The Morris drawing-room was all very well in its way, of course; but tulip-pattern curtains and De Morgan pottery don't quite make up for a *réchauffé* of kidneys. Moreover, a suspicion floated dimly through the air that to-morrow's dawn would see those three kippered herrings as the sole alternative to the curried drumsticks left behind as a legacy by this evening's roast chicken. Hatherley was an epicure, like most club-bred men, and his converse for the day took a colour from the breakfast table for good or for evil. So he started out that morning in a dormant ill-humour, prepared to tease and "draw" Massinger, who had had the bad taste to desert Bohemia for dull respectability and ill-paid Squiredom in the wilds of Suffolk.

Hugh showed him first the region of the sandhills. The sandhills were a decent bit

to begin with. "Æolian sands!" Hatherley murmured contemplatively as Hugh mentioned the name. "How very pretty! How very poetical! You can hardly regret it yourself, Massinger, this overwhelming of your salt marshes by the shifting sands, when you reflect at leisure it was really done by anything with so sweet an epithet as Æolian."

"I thought so once," Hugh answered dryly, with obvious distaste, "when it was the property of my late respected father-in-law. But circumstances alter cases, you know, as somebody once remarked with luminous platitude; and since I came into the estate myself, to tell you the truth, I can't forgive the beastly sands, even though they happen to be called Æolian."

"Æolian sands," Hatherley repeated once more, half aloud, with a tender reluctance. "Curious; there's hardly any word in the language to rhyme with so simple a sound as Æolian. Tmolian does it, of course; but Tmolian, you see, is scarcely English, or if English at all, only by courtesy. There's a fellow called Croll, I believe, who's invented a splendid theory of his own about the

Glacial Epoch; but I've never seen it anywhere described in print as the Crollian hypothesis. One might coin the adjective, of course, on the analogy of Darwinian and Carlylese and Ruskinian and Tennysonian; but it's scarcely legitimate to coin a word for the sake of a rhyme. *Æolian*—*Crollian*: the jingle would only go down, I'm afraid, in geological circles."

Hugh's lip curled contemptuously. He had passed through all that: he knew its hollowness only too well—the merely literary way of regarding things. Time was when he himself had seen in everything but a chance for crisp and telling epigrams, an opening for a particular rhyme or turn of phrase. Nowadays, however, all that was changed: he knew better: he was a practical man—a Squire and a landlord. "My dear fellow," he said, with some slight acerbity peeping through the threadbare places in his friendly tone, "men talk like that when they're hopelessly young. Contact with affairs makes a man soon forget phrases. We deal in facts, not words, when we finally arrive at years of discretion. I think now

of the reality of the blown sand—the depreciation and loss of rent—not the mere prettiness of the sound *Æolian*.”

“Yes, I know, my dear boy,” Hatherley answered, in his patronizing way, scarcely smearing his barb with delusive honey. “You’ve gone over to the enemy now : you’ve elected to dwell in the courts of Gath : you’re no longer of Ours : you’re an adopted Philistine. Deserters do well to fight in defence of their new side. You’d rather have your wretched fat salt marshes, with their prize oxen and their lean agues, than all these pretty little tumbled sandhills that make such a fairyland of mimic hillsides.—Don’t say you wouldn’t, for I know you would : you descend on stepping-stones of your dead self, the opposite way from Tennyson’s people, to lower things—even to the nethermost abysses of *Philistia*.”

Hugh swung his cane uneasily in his hand. He remembered only too well that summer afternoon when he himself—not yet a full-fledged squireen—had indulged in that self-same rhyme of “*Æolian*,” “*Tmolian*,” before the astonished face of old Mr. Meysey. He

remembered the magnificent long-horned Highland cattle—"Bulls that walk the pastures in kingly-flashing coats," he had called them that day, after George Meredith. He knew now they were only old Grimes's black Ayrshires, fattened for market upon the rank salt-marsh vegetation. "Well, you see, Hatherley," he said, with a certain inward consciousness of appearing to his friend at an appalling disadvantage, "we must look at practical matters from a practical standpoint. Government's behaved scandalously to the landowners about the protection of the Suffolk foreshore. These sandhills tell upon a fellow's income. If the sand could only be turned into gold dust——"

Hatherley interrupted him with a happy thought—

" 'Where Afric's sunny fountains
Roll down their golden sand,' "

he cried with an attitude. "If the Char were only Pactolus, now, 'a fellow's income' would be still intact. There's the very rhyme for you. 'Æolian'—'Pactolian': you can write a sonnet to it embodying that notion.—At least you could have

written one, in the good old days, when you were still landless and still immortal. But in these latter times, as you say yourself, contact with affairs has certainly made you forget phrases.—You've come down from Olympus to be a Suffolk Squire. You'll admit it yourself, there's been a terrible falling off, of late, you know—one can't deny it—in your verses, Massinger."

"Bohemia is naturally intolerant of seceders," Hugh answered gloomily. "Each man sees in his neighbour's backsliding the premonition of his own proximate downfall.—You will marry in time, and migrate, even you yourself, to fixed quarters in Askelon.—Prague's a capital town to secure lodgings in for some weeks of one's youth, but it's not the precise place where a man would like to settle down for a whole lifetime."

They walked along in silence for a while, each absorbed in his own thoughts—Hatherley ruminating upon this melancholy spectacle of a degenerate son of dear old Cheyne Row gone wrong for ever : Massinger reflecting in his own mind upon the closer insight into the facts of life which property, with its cares

and responsibilities, gives one—when he suddenly halted with a short sharp whistle at a turn of the path. “Whew!” he cried; “why, what the dickens is this? The poplar’s disappeared—at least, its place, I mean.”

“Ah, yes! Mrs. Massinger told me all about that unlucky poplar when you were gone last night,” Hatherley answered cheerfully. “The only good object in the view, she said—and I can easily believe her, to judge by the remainder. It got struck by lightning one stormy night, and disappeared then and there entirely!”

“This is strange—very strange!” Hugh went on to himself, never heeding the babbling interruption. “The sand’s clearly collected on this side of late. There’s a distinct hummock here, like the ones at Grimes’s.—I wonder what on earth these waves and mounds of sand can mean?—The wind’s not going to attack this side of the river, too, is it?”

“Ah, Squoire,” a man at work in the field put in, coming up to join them, and leaning upon his pitchfork—“ah’m glad yo’ve come to see it yourself, naow. That’s jest what it

be. The sand's a-driftin'. Ah said to Tom, the night the thunderbolt took th' owd poplar—ah said: 'Tom,' says ah, 'that there poplar were the only bar as stopped the river an' the sand from shifting. It's shifted all along till it's reached the poplar; an' naow it'll shift an' shift an' shift till it gets to Lowestoft or mayhap to Norwich.'—An' if yo'll look, Squire, yo'll see for yourself—the river's acshally runnin' zackly where the tree had used to stand; an' the sand's a-driftin' an' a-driftin', same as it allays drift down yonner at Grimes's. An' it's my belief it'll never stop till it's swallowed up the Hall and the whole o' Whitestrand."

Hugh Massinger gazed in silence at the spot where the Whitestrand poplar had once stood with an utter feeling of sinking helplessness taking possession at once of his heart and bosom. A single glance told him beyond doubt the man was right. The poplar had stood as the one frail barrier to the winds and waves of the German Ocean. He had burnt it down, by wile and guile, of deliberate intent, that night of the thunderstorm, to get rid of the single mute witness to Elsie's

suicide. And now, his Nemesis had worked itself out. The sea was advancing, inch by inch, with irresistible march, against doomed Whitestrand.

Inch by inch ! Nay, yard by yard. Gazing across to the opposite bank, and roughly measuring the distance with his eye, Hugh saw the river had been diverted northward many feet since he last visited the site of the poplar. He always avoided that hateful spot : the very interval that had elapsed since his last visit enabled him all the better to gauge at sight the distance the river had advanced meanwhile in its silent invasion.

“ I must get an engineer to come down and see to this,” he said shortly. “ We must put up a breakwater ourselves, I suppose, since a supine administration refuses to help us.—I wonder who’s the proper man to go to for breakwaters ? I’d wire to town to-night, if I knew whom to wire to, and check the thing before it runs any farther.”

“ What’s that Swinburne says ? ” Hatherley asked musingly. “ I forget the exact run of the particular lines, but they occur somewhere in the ‘ Hymn to Proserpine : ’

“ ‘Will ye bridle the deep sea with reins? will ye chasten the high sea with rods?

Will ye take her to chain her with chains who is older than all, ye gods?’

“I don’t expect, my dear boy, your engineer will do much for you. Man’s but a pigmy before these natural powers. A breakwater’s helpless against the ceaseless dashing of the eternal sea.”

Hugh Massinger almost lost his temper—especially when he reflected with bitter self-abasement that those were the very lines he had quoted to Elsie—in his foolish pre-territorial days—about Mr. Meysey’s sensible proposals for obtaining an injunction against the German Ocean. “Eternal sea! Eternal fiddlesticks!” he answered testily. “It’s all very well for you to talk; but it’s a matter of life and death to me, this checking the inroads of your eternal humbug. Eternal sea, indeed! What utter rubbish! It’s the curse of the purely literary intellect that it never looks at Things at all, but only at Phrases.—We’ve got to build a breakwater, that’s what it comes to. And a breakwater’ll run into a pot of money.”

“Pity the old tree ever got burnt down, anyhow, to begin with,” Hatherley murmured low, endeavouring, now he had fairly drawn his man, to assume a sympathetic expression of countenance.

“No!” Hugh thundered back savagely at last, unable to control himself. “Having to build a breakwater’s bad enough; but I wouldn’t have that hateful old tree back again there for all the gold that ever flowed in that Pactolus you chatter about.—Leave the tree alone, I say. Confound it! I hate it!”

They walked back slowly to the Hall in silence, passing through the village even so, out of pure habit, for the three herrings. Hugh was evidently very much put out. Hatherley considered him even rude and bearish. A man should restrain himself before the faces of his guests. At the door, Hatherley strolled off round the garden walks and lit a cigar. Hugh went up to his own dressing-room.

The rest Hatherley never knew; he only knew that at dinner that night Mrs. Mas-singer’s eyes were red and sore with crying. For when Hugh reached his own room—that

pretty little dressing-room with the pomegranate wall-paper and the pale blue Lahore hangings—he found Winifred fiddling at his private desk, a new tall black-walnut desk with endless drawers and niches and pigeon-holes. A sudden something rose in his throat as he saw her fumbling at the doors of the cabinet. Where had she found that carefully guarded key?—Aha, he knew! That fellow Hatherley!—Hatherley had taken a cigar from his case as they went out for their stroll together that luckless morning; and instead of returning the case to its owner, had laid it down in his careless way on the study table. He always kept the key concealed in the case.—Winifred must accidentally have found it, and tried to worm out her husband's secrets.—He hated such meanness in other people. How much, he wondered, had she found out now after all for her trouble?

Ah!

They both cried out in one voice together; for Winifred had opened a pigeon-hole box with the special key, and was looking intently with rigid eyes at—a small gold watch and a bundle of letters.

With a wild dart forward, Hugh tore them from her grasp and crunched them in his hand ; but not before Winifred had seen two things : first, that the watch was a counterpart of her own—the very watch Hugh had given to Elsie Challoner ; second, that the letters were in a familiar hand—no other hand than Elsie Challoner’s.

She fronted him long with a pale cold face. Hugh took the watch and letters before her very eyes, and locked them up again in their pigeon-hole, angrily. “ So this is how you play the spy upon me ! ” he cried at last with supreme contempt in his voice and manner.

But Winifred simply answered nothing. She burst into a fierce wild flood of tears. “ I knew it ! ” she moaned in an agony of slighted affection. “ I knew it ! I knew it ! ”

So, after all, in spite of her flight and her pretended coolness, Elsie was corresponding still with her husband ! Cruel, cruel, cruel Elsie ! Yet why had she given him back his watch again ? That was more than Winifred could ever explain in her simple philosophy. She could only cry and cry her eyes out.

CHAPTER XXXI.

COMING ROUND.

WHEN Warren Relf steered back his barque to San Remo and Elsie that next autumn, he had not yet exactly been "boomed," as Edie had predicted; but his artistic or rather his business prospects had improved considerably through the intervening summer. Hatherley's persistent friendly notices of his work in the *Charing Cross Review*, and Mitchison's constant flow of rhapsodies about his "charming *morbidezza*" in West-end drawing-rooms, had begun to bring his sea-pieces at last more prominently into notice. The skipper of the *Mud-Turtle* had gone up one. It was the mode to speak of him now in artistic coteries, no longer as a melancholy instance of well-meaning failure, but as a young man of rising though misunderstood talent. His knowledge

of "values" was allowed to be profound. If you wished to lead the fore-front of opinion, indeed, you referred familiarly in a parenthetical side-sentence to "genius like Burne Jones's, or Relf's, or Watts's." To be sure, he didn't yet sell; but it was understood in astute buying circles that people who could pick up an early Relf dirt cheap and were prepared to hang on long enough to their purchase, would be sure in the end to see the colour of their money. It was even asserted by exceptionally knowing connoisseurs at the Burlington and the Savage that that colour would most probably have changed meanwhile, by the subtle alchemy of unearned increment, from silvery white to golden yellow. Warren Relf sat perched on the flowing tide of opportunism; and all critics are abandoned opportunists by use and by nature. They invariably salute the rising sun; the coming man has their warmest suffrages.

That winter at San Remo was the happiest Warren had yet passed there; for he began to perceive that Elsie was relenting. In a timid, tremulous, shamefaced, unacknowledged

sort of way, she was learning little by little to love him. She would not confess it at first, even to herself. Elsie was too much of a woman to admit in the intimacy of her own heart, far less in the ear of any outside confidante, that having once loved Hugh she could now veer round and love Warren. The sense of personal consistency runs deep in women. They can't bear to turn their backs upon their dead selves, even though it be in order to rise to higher and ever higher planes of affection and devotion. Still, in spite of everything, Elsie Challoner grew by degrees dimly aware that she did actually love the quiet young marine painter. She had a hard struggle with herself, to be sure, before she could quite recognize the fact; but she recognized it at last, and in her own heart frankly admitted it. Warren was not indeed externally brilliant and vivid, like Hugh; he didn't sparkle with epigram and repartee; the soul that was in him let itself out more fully and freely on quiet canvas, in beautiful dreamy poetic imaginings, than in the feverish give-and-take of modern society. It let itself out more fully and freely, too, in

the gentle repose of *tête-à-tête* talk than in the stimulating atmosphere of a big dining-room, or of Mrs. Bouverie Barton's celebrated Wednesday evening receptions. But while Hugh scintillated, Warren Relf's nature burned rather with a clear and steady flame. It was easy enough for anybody to admire Hugh; his strong points glittered in the eye of day: only those who dip a little below the surface ever reached the profounder depths of good and beauty that lay hid in such a mind as Warren's. Yet Elsie felt in her own soul it was a truer thing after all to love Warren than to love Hugh; a greater triumph to have won Warren's deep and earnest regard than to have impressed Hugh's fancy once with a selfish passion. She felt all that; but being a woman, of course she never acknowledged it. She went on fighting hard against her own heart, on behalf of the old dead worse love, and to the detriment of the new and living better one; and all the while she pretended to herself she was thereby displaying her profound affection and her noble consistency. She must never marry Warren, whom she truly loved, and who truly loved

her, for the sake of that Hugh who had never loved her, and whom she herself could never have loved had she only known him as he really was in all his mean and selfish inner nature. That may be foolish, but it's intensely womanly. We must take women as they are. They were made so at first, and all our philosophy will never mend it.

She couldn't endure that any one should imagine she had forgotten her love and her sorrow for Hugh. She couldn't endure, after her experience with Hugh, that any man should take her, thus helpless and penniless. If she'd been an heiress like Winifred, now, things might perhaps have been a little different; if by marrying Warren she could have put him in a position to prosecute his art, as she would have wished him to prosecute it, without regard for the base and vulgar necessity of earning bread-and-cheese for himself and his family, she might possibly have consented in such a case to forego her own private and personal feelings, and to make him happy for art's sake and humanity's. But to burden his struggling life still further, when she knew how little his art brought

him, and how much he longed to earn an income for his mother and Edie to retire upon—that she couldn't bear to face for a moment. She would dismiss the subject; she would make him feel she could never be his; it was only tantalizing poor kind-hearted Warren to keep him dangling about any longer.

“Elsie,” he said to her one day on the hills, as they strolled together, by olive and pinewood, among the asphodels and anemones, “I had another letter from London this morning. The market's looking up. Benson has sold the ‘Rade de Villefranche.’”

“I'm so glad, Warren,” Elsie answered warmly. “It's a sweet picture—one of your loveliest. Did you get a good price for it?”

“Forty guineas. That's not so bad as prices go. So I'm going to buy Edie that new dinner dress you and I were talking about. I know you won't mind running over to Mentone and choosing some nice stuff at the draper's there for me. Things are looking up. There's no doubt I'm rising in the English market. My current quotations improve daily. Benson says he sold that bit to

a rich American. Americans, if you can once manage to catch them, are capital customers—‘patrons,’ I suppose, one ought to say; but I decline to be patronized by a rich American. I think ‘customer,’ after all, a much truer and sincerer word—ten thousand times as manly and independent.”

“So I think too. I hate Patronage. It savours of flunkeydom; betrays the toadyism of fashionable art—the ‘Portrait-of-a-Gentleman’ style of painting.—But, oh, Warren, I’m so sorry the Rade’s to be transported to America. It’s such a graceful, delicate, dainty little picture. I quite loved it. To me that seems the most terrible part of all an artist’s trials and troubles. There you toil and moil and slave and labour at one of your exquisite, poetical, self-absorbing pictures; you throw a part of your life, a share of your soul, a piece of your own inner spiritual being, on to your simple square of dead canvas; you make it live and breathe and feel almost; you work away at it, absorbed and entranced in it, living in it and dreaming of it, for days and weeks and months together; you give it a thousand last long loving touches; you

alter and correct, and improve and modify; you wait till it all absolutely satisfies your own high and exacting critical standard; and then, after you've lavished on it your utmost care and skill and pains—after you've learned to know and to love it tenderly—after it's become to you something like your own child—an offspring of your inmost and deepest nature—you sell it away for prompt cash to a rich American, who'll hang it up in his brand-new drawing-room at St. Louis or Chicago between two horrid daubs by fashionable London or Paris painters, and who'll say to his friends with a smile after dinner: 'Yes, that's a pretty little thing enough in its way, that tiny sea-piece there. I gave forty guineas in England for that: it's by Relf of London.—But observe this splendid "Cleopatra" over here, just above the sideboard: she's a real So-and-so'—torture itself will not induce the present chronicler to name the particular painter of fashionable nudities whom Elsie thus pilloried on the scaffold of her high disdain—'I paid for that, sir, a cool twenty thousand dollars!'"

Warren smiled a smile of thrilling pleasure,

and investigated his boots with shy timidity. Such sympathy from her outweighed a round dozen of American purchasers. "Thank you, Elsie," he said simply. "That's quite true. I've felt it myself.—But still, in the end, all good work, if it's really good, will appeal somehow, at some time, to somebody, somewhere. I confess I often envy authors in that. Their finished work is impressed upon a thousand copies, and scattered broadcast over all the world. Sooner or later it's pretty sure to meet the eyes of most among those who are capable of appreciating it.—But a painting is a much more monopolist product. If the wrong man happens at first to buy it and to carry it into the wholly wrong society, the painter may feel for the moment his work is lost, and his time thrown away, so far as any direct appreciation or loving sympathy with his idea is concerned.—Still, Elsie, it gets its reward in due time. When we're all dead and gone, some soul will look upon the picture and be glad. And it's a great thing to have sold the Rade, anyway, because of the dear old Mater and Edie.—I'm able to do a great deal more for them

now ; I hope I shall soon be in a position to keep them comfortably.—And do you know, somehow, these last few years—I'm ashamed to say it, but it's the fact none the less—I've begun to feel a sort of nascent desire to be successful, Elsie."

Elsie dropped her voice a tone lower. "I'm sorry for that, Warren," she answered shyly.

"Why so?"

Elsie dissimulated. "Because one of the things I most admired about you when I first knew you was your sturdy desire to do good work for its own sake, and to leave success to take care of itself in the dim background."

"But, Elsie, I've many more reasons now to wish for success.—You know why—I've never told you, but I begin to hope—I've ventured to hope the last few months—I know it's presumptuous of me, but still I hope—that when I can earn enough to make a wife happy——"

Elsie stopped dead short at once on the narrow path that wound in and out among the clambering pine-woods, and fronting him full, with her parasol planted firmly on the

ground, cut him off in a desperately resolute tone: "Warren, if I wouldn't marry you unsuccessful, you may be quite sure success at any rate would never, never induce me to marry you."

It was the first time in all her life she had said a single word about marriage before him, and Warren therefore at once accepted it, paradoxically but rightly, as a good omen. "Then you love me, Elsie?" he cried, all trembling.

Elsie's heart fluttered with painful tremors. "Don't ask me, Warren!" she murmured, thrilling. "Don't make me say so.—Don't worm it out of me!—Dear Warren, you know I like you dearly. I feel and have always felt towards you like a sister. After all I've suffered, don't torture me more.—I can never, never, never marry you!"

"But you do love me, Elsie?"

Elsie's eyes fell irresolute to the ground. It was a hard fight between love and pride. But Warren's pleading face conquered in the end. "I do love you, Warren," she answered simply.

"Then I don't mind the rest," Warren

cried with a joyous burst, seizing her hand in his. "If you love me, Elsie, I can wait for ever. Success or no success, marriage or no marriage, I can wait for ever. I only want to know you love me."

"You will have to wait for ever," Elsie answered low. "You have made me say the word, and in spite of myself I have said it. I love you, Warren, but I can never, never, never marry you!"

"And I say," Edie Relf remarked with much incisiveness, when Elsie told her bit by bit the whole story that same evening at the Villa Rossa, "that you treated him very shabbily indeed, and that Warren's a great deal too good and kind and sweet to you. Some girls don't know when they're well off. Warren's a brick—that's what I call him."

"That's what I call him too," Elsie answered half tearful. "At least I would, if brick was a word I ever applied to anybody anywhere. But still—I can never, never, never marry him!"

"Thank goodness," Edie said, with a jerk of her head, "*I* wasn't born romantic and

hysterical. Whenever any nice good fellow that I can really like swims into my ken and asks *me* to marry him—which unfortunately none of the nice good fellows of my acquaintance show the slightest inclination at present to do—I shall answer him promptly, ‘Like a bird—Arthur,’ or Thomas, or Guy, or Walter, or Reginald, or whatever else his nice good name may happen to be—Mr. Hatherley’s is Arthur—and proceed at once to make him happy for ever. But some people seem to prefer tatantalizing them. For my own part, my dear, I’ve a distinct preference for making men happy whenever possible. I was born to make a good man happy, and I’d make him happy with the greatest pleasure in life, if only the good man would recognize my abilities for the production of happiness, and give me the desired opportunity for translating my benevolent wishes towards him into actual practice. But good men are painfully scarce nowadays. They don’t swarm. They retire bashfully. Very few of them seem to float by accident in their gay shallops towards the port of San Remo.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON TRIAL.

MATTERS at Whitestrand had been going, meanwhile, from bad to worse. Winifred never spoke another word to Hugh about Elsie's watch. Her pride prevented her. She would not stoop to demand an explanation. And Hugh had no explanation of his own to volunteer. No ready lie rose spontaneous to his lips. He dropped the subject, then and for ever.

But the question of the encroachments could not be quite so cavalierly dropped: it pressed itself insidiously and silently upon Hugh's attention. An eminent engineer came down from London to inspect the sand-drifts, shortly after Hatherley's visit. By that time, the sand had risen high on the post of the aggressive notice-board which informed the would-be tourist explorer, with the usual

churlishness and the usual ignorance of English procedure, that Trespassers would be Prosecuted with the Utmost Rigour of the Law. The ocean, however, refused to be terrorized, and trespassed unabashed in the very face of the alarming notice. Hugh took his new ally down to inspect the threatened corner of the estate. The eminent engineer stroked a reflective chin and remarked cheerfully with a meditative smile that currents were very ticklish things to deal with, on their own ground: that when you interfered with the natural course of a current, you never could tell which way it would go next; and that diverting it was much like taking a leap in the dark, as far as probable consequences to the shore were concerned. After which reassuring vaticinations, the eminent engineer proceeded at once with perfect confidence to erect an expensive and ingenious breakwater off the site of the poplar, which strained the slender balloon of Hugh's remaining credit to the very verge of its utmost bursting point. A year passed by in the work of building and throwing out the breakwater: and as soon as it was finished, with

much acclamation, a scour set in just round its sides which ate away the grounds behind even faster than ever. The eminent engineer, pocketing his cheque, stroked his chin once more in placid contentment, and observed with the complacency of a scientific looker-on: "Just as I told you. It's impossible to calculate the exact effect of these things beforehand. The scour will do more harm than the sea did. We have the satisfaction of knowing, however, that we've done our duty. Perhaps, now, the safest thing for the estate would be to turn right round and pull it all down again."

The estate, in fact, was simply doomed. Æolian, Pactolian, indeed: ah me, the irony of it! Those Æolian sands were overwhelming Whitestrand. The poplar had formed its one frail support. In destroying the poplar, Hugh had simply outwitted himself. No earthly science could now repair that fatal step. Physicians were in vain. Engineers and breakwaters were of no avail. The cruel crawling sea had begun remorselessly to claim its own, and day after day it claimed it piecemeal.

Nor was that all. Hugh's affairs were getting more and more involved in other ways also. Those were the days of the decline of Squiredom. Agricultural depression had told upon the rents. Turnips were a failure. Mangolds were feeble. Hessian fly had made waste straw of old Grimes's wheat crops. Barley had never done so badly for years. Foot-and-mouth disease and pleuro-pneumonia had combined with American competition and Australian mutton to lower prices and to starve landlords. Time was, indeed, when Hugh would have laughed aloud at the bare idea of being seriously affected by the fall in corn or taking a personal interest in the ridiculous details of the diseases of cattle. Such loathsome things were the business of the veterinaries. Now, however, he laughed on the wrong side of his mouth: he complained bitterly of the supineness of government in not stamping out the germs of rinderpest, and in taking so little care of the soil of England. Buff all his days till then, by political conviction, he began to go over to the Blues out of sheer chagrin. He doubted the wisdom of free trade, and coquetted

openly with the local apostles of retributive protection. But rents came in worse and worse for all that, at each successive White-strand audit. The interest on the mortgage was hard to raise, and the servants' wages at the Hall, it was whispered about, had fallen into arrears for a whole quarter. Clearly the young Squire must be short of funds; and nothing was afloat to help his exchequer into safer waters.

But drowning men cling to the proverbial straw. For his own part, Hugh had high hopes at first of his "Life's Philosophy." He had trimmed his little bark most cunningly, he thought, to tempt the stormy sea of popular approbation. There was the big long poem for heavy ballast, and the songs and occasional pieces in his lightest vein for cork belts to redress the balance. Sooner or later, the world must surely catch glimpses of the truth, that it still enclosed a great unknown Poet! He waited for the storm of applause to begin; the critics would doubtless soon get up their concerted pæan. But one day, a few weeks after the volume was published, he took up a copy of the *Bystander*, that most

superior review—the special organ of his own special clique—and read in it with hushed breath . . . a hostile notice of his new and hopeful volume. His heart sank as he read and read. Line after line, the sickening sense of failure deepened upon him. It had not been so in the old days. Then, the critics had hastened to bring him butter in a lordly dish. But now, all that was utterly changed. He read with a cheek flushed with indignation. At last, the review touched bottom. “Mr. Massinger,” said his critic in concluding his notice, “has long since retired, we all know, into Lowther Arcadia. There, among the mimic ranges of the Suffolk sand-hills—a doll’s paradise of dale and mountain—he has betaken himself with his pretty little pipe to the green side of a pretty little knoll, and has tuned his throat to a pretty little lay, all about a series of pretty little ladies, of the usual insipid Lowther-Arcadian style of beauty. Now, these waxen-faced damsels somehow fail to interest us. Their cheeks are all most becomingly red; their eyes are all most liquidly blue; their locks are all of the yellowest tow; and their philosophy

is a cheap and ineffective mixture of the Elegant Extracts with the choicest old crusted English morals of immemorial proverbial wisdom. In short, they are unfortunately stuffed with sawdust. The long poem which gives a title to the volume, on the other hand, though molluscoid in its flabbiness, is as ambitious as it is feeble, and as dull as it is involved. Here, for example, selected from some five hundred equally inflated stanzas, are the modest views Mr. Massinger now holds on his own position in the material Cosmos. The scene, we ought to explain, is laid in Oxford: the time, midnight or a little later: and the Bard speaks *in propria personâ*:—

“ ‘The city lies below me wrapped in slumber;
 Mute and unmoved in all her streets she lies:
 ’Mid rapid thoughts that throng me without number
 Flashes the phantom of an old surmise.
 Her hopes and fears and griefs are all suspended:
 Ten thousand souls throughout her precincts take
 Sleep, in whose bosom life and death are blended,
 And I alone awake.

“ ‘Am I alone the solitary centre
 Of all the seeming universe around,
 With mocking senses, through whose portals enter
 Unmeaning phantasies of sight and sound?

Are all the countless minds wherewith I people
The empty forms that float before my eyes
Vain as the cloud that girds the distant steeple
With snowy canopies?

“ ‘Yet though the world be but myself unfolded—
Soul bent again on soul in mystic play—
No less each sense and thought and act is moulded
By dead necessities I may not sway :
Some mightier power against my will can move
me ;
Some potent nothing force and overawe :
Though I be all that is, I feel above me
The godhead of blind law !’

“ Seven or eight pages of this hysterical, cartilaginous, invertebrate nonsense have failed to convince us that Mr. Massinger is really, as he seems implicitly to believe, the hub of the universe, and the sole intelligent or sentient being within the entire circle of organic creation. Many other poets indeed have thought the same, but few have been so candid as to express their opinion. We are tempted, therefore, to conclude our notice of our Bard’s singular views as to Mr. Massinger’s Place in Nature with a small apologue, in his own best manner, which we will venture to entitle—

“ ‘MARINE PHILOSOPHY IN SILLY SUFFOLK.

“ ‘A jellyfish swam an East Anglian sea,
 And he said, “This world, it consists of me.
 There’s nothing above, and there’s nothing below,
 That a jellyfish ever can possibly know—
 Since we’ve got no sight or hearing or smell—
 Beyond what our single sense can tell.
 Now all we can learn from the sense of touch
 Is the fact of our feelings, viewed as such;
 But to think they have any external cause
 Is an inference clean against logical laws.
 Again, to suppose, as I’ve hitherto done,
 There are other jellyfish under the sun
 Is a pure assumption that can’t be backed
 By one jot of proof or one single fact:
 And being a bit of a submarine poet,
 I’ve written some amateur lines to show it.
 In fact (like Hume) I distinctly doubt
 If there’s anything else at all about:
 For the universe simply centres in me,
 And if I were not, why nothing would be!”
 Just then, a shark, who was passing by,
 Gobbled him down, in the twink of an eye:
 And he died, with a few convulsive twists:—
 But somehow the universe still exists.’ ”

Hugh laid down the *Bystander* on the table by his side with a burning sense of wrong and indignation. The measure he himself had often meted to others, therewithal had it been meted to him; and he realized now in his own person the bitterness of the

stings he had often inflicted out of pure wantonness on endless young and anonymous authors. And how unjust, too, this sweeping condemnation, when he came to think of his splendid "Ode to Manetho," his touching "Lines on the Death of a Sky Terrier," his exquisitely humorous "Song of Fee-faw-fum!" He knew they were good, every verse and word of them. This was a crushing review, and from his own familiar friend as well; for he saw at once from that unmistakable style that it was Mitchison who had penned this cruel criticism. Cheyne Row had clearly cast off her recalcitrant son. He was to it now an outcast and a pariah, a wicked deserter to the camp of the Philistines.

At the same moment, Winifred, on the sofa opposite, coughing her dry little cough from time to time, was flushing painfully over some funny passage or other she was reading with much gusto in the *Charing Cross Review*. They seldom spoke unnecessarily to one another nowadays. They were leading a life of mutual avoidance, as far as possible, communicating only on strictly practical topics, when occasion demanded,

and not even then in the most amicable spirit. But just at that moment, Winifred's flushed face filled Hugh with intense and profound suspicion. What could she be reading that made her blush so?

"Let me see it," he cried, as Winifred tried to smuggle away the paper unseen under a pile of magazines.

"No, no! There's nothing in it!" Winifred answered nervously.

"I *must* see," Hugh went on, and snatched it from her hand. Winifred fought hard to tear it or destroy it. But Hugh was too strong for her. He caught it and opened it. A single phrase on a torn page caught his eye as he did so. "Verses addressed to Mr. Massinger of Whitestrand Hall, formerly a poet." He glanced at the end. They were signed "A. H."—It was Arthur Hatherley.

Bohemia had declared open war upon him. He saw why. Those tell-tale words, "Of Whitestrand Hall," struck the keynote of its virtuous indignation. And that fellow Relf, too, had poisoned the mind of Cheyne Row against him. Henceforth, he might expect no quarter thence. His own familiar friends

had turned to rend him. No more could he hope to roll the cheerful log. His dream of literary glory was gone—clean gone—vanished for ever.

Winifred had lifted the paper which Hugh flung from him, and was skimming the *Bystander* review meanwhile. Her cheek flushed hotter and redder still. But she said never a word in any way about it. She wouldn't seem to have noticed the attack. "Shall I accept Lady Mortmayne's invitation?" she asked with a chilly heartsinking.

Bohemia had clearly turned against them; but Philistia at least, Philistia was left to console their bosoms. If one can't be a poet, one can at any rate be a snob. In the bitterness of his heart, Hugh answered: "Yes. Go anywhere on earth to a body with a handle." Then he tried to rouse himself, to put on a cheerful and unconcerned manner. "I like to patronize art," he went on with a hard smile, "and as a work of art I consider Lady Mortmayne almost perfect."

Winifred laid down her paper on the table. "What shall I say to her?" she asked glassily. She was a timid letter-writer.

Even since their estrangement, Hugh most often dictated her society notes for her.

"Dear Lady Mortmayne, we shall have great pleasure——" Hugh began with vigour.

"Isn't 'we have great pleasure' better English, Hugh?" Winifred asked quietly, as she examined her nib with close attention.

"No," Hugh blurted back. "Certainly not. Shall have great pleasure's quite good enough for me, so I suppose it's good enough for you, too, isn't it?"

"I don't know about that. Literary English and society English are two distinct dialects."

Hugh bit his lip with an angry look. He was getting positively cruel now. "If you can write so well," he muttered between his clenched teeth, "write it yourself. 'Great pleasure in accepting your kind invitaton for Thursday next.'"

"Doesn't 'Thursday the 17th' sound rather more formal?" Winifred asked once more, looking up from her paper.

"Of course it does. That's just my reason for carefully avoiding it. Why on earth should you go out of your way to be so

precious formal? Thursday next's what everybody says in conversation. Write exactly as you always speak. Formal, indeed! Such absurd rubbish with a next-door neighbour!"

"But she writes, 'Lady Mortmayne requests the pleasure.' I think I ought to answer her in the third person."

"That's because she was sending out ever so many invitations at once, all exactly alike. 'Lady Mortmayne requests the bother—I mean the pleasure—of Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so's company.' It's different when you're answering people you know intimately. You needn't be absolutely wooden then. Besides, you've got to make that long explanation about those dahlia roots you remember you promised her. No literary man in all England would trust himself to write so complicated a letter as the dahlia roots must make, in the third person. Our language isn't adapted to it; it can't be done. But fools rush in where angels fear to tread, we all know perfectly. Write it, if you choose, in the third person."

"I think I will. I'll begin all over again. Thanks very much for calling me a fool. I

won't return the compliment and call you an angel. 'Mr. and Mrs. Massinger have great pleasure——'"

"Will have great pleasure!"

"Have great pleasure. I prefer it so, thank you. It's better English. 'Have great pleasure in accepting Lady Mortmayne's kind invitation for Thursday the 17th, and will bring the dahlias she promised——'"

"Who promised? Lady Mortmayne?"

"Oh, bother! I mean 'the dahlias Mrs. Massinger promised, which she would have brought before, but she was unfortunately prevented by her gardener having quite inadvertently——'"

"For Heaven's sake, split it up into short sentences," Hugh cried, on tenter-hooks. "I couldn't let such a note as that go out of my house—I mean, our house, Winifred—if my life depended upon it. A man of letters allow his wife to make such an exhibition of impossible English! I won't dictate to you in the third person—the thing's impossible: I'll be no party to murdering our mother tongue—but you might at least say, 'Mrs. Massinger will at the same time bring the

dahlias she promised Lady Mortmayne. They would have been sent before'—and so forth, and so forth, in logical clauses. My English style may not perhaps suit the exalted standard of our friends in the *Bystander*, but I can at least avoid running a whole letter into one long tortuous snake-like sentence. I never lose myself in the sands of rhetoric. My English will parse, if it won't construe."

"I wish I was clever," Winifred said, growing red, "and then I could write my own letters without you."

"'Be good, my child, and let who will be clever:' Charles Kingsley," Hugh quoted provokingly. "'An honest man's the noblest work of God:' Alexander Pope. (I think it was Pope: or was it Sam Johnson?) A placid woman runs him close, ecod: Hugh Massinger. Ecod's a powerful weak rhyme, I admit, but what can you expect from a mere impromptu? I only wish all women were placid. Well, the moral of these three immortal lines, selected from the works of three poets in three different ages born (Dryden), is simply this—you do very well as you are, Winifred. Don't seek to be

clever. It doesn't suit you. Take my advice. Leave it alone.—For if you do, you'll find it in the end a complete failure.”

“Hugh! You insult me.”

“Very well then, my dear. You will be able to exercise Christian patience and resignation in pocketing the insult—as I have to do from you very often.”

Winifred shut down her writing-case with a bang and burst, not into tears, but into an uncontrollable fit of violent coughing. She coughed and coughed till her face was purple and livid with the effort. Hugh watched her silently, as hard as adamant. She had often coughed this way of late. The habit was growing on her. Hugh thought she ought to cure herself of it.

“I shall go up next week again to consult Sir Anthony Wraxall,” she said at last, when she recovered her breath, gasping and choking. “Will you go with me, Hugh?”

“We've no cash now to waste on junketing and gadding about in town,” Hugh answered gloomily. “A pretty time to talk about riotous living, with the servants' wages all overdue, and duns bothering at the door for

their wretched money. My presence could hardly give you any appreciable pleasure. You can stop at the dingy old lodgings in Albert Row, and Mrs. Bouverie Barton will help gad about with you. You can trapes together over half London."

Winifred bowed her poor head down in silence. Her heart was sick. It was full to bursting. This was all she had bought with the fee-simple of Whitestrand.

That moment the servant came in with a paper on a tray. "What is it?" Hugh asked, glancing listlessly towards it.

"It's Queen's taxes, sir," the maid answered: the financial crisis had long since compelled them to discharge their last surviving footman.

"Tell the Queen she must call again," Hugh burst out savagely. "She can't have them. She may whistle for her money.—Queen's taxes indeed! The butcher and the baker'll be calling to get their bills paid next! But they won't succeed; that's one comfort. You can't get blood out of a stone, thank goodness."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN ARTISTIC EVENT.

"MR. WARREN RELF," said the daintily etched invitation card, "requests the pleasure of a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Bouverie Barton and friends to a Private View of his Paintings and Watercolour Sketches, on Saturday, October the 3rd, from 2.30 to 6 P.M., at 128, Bletchingley Road, South Kensington."

Such a graceful little invitation card never was seen, neatly designed by the artist himself, with a bold flight of seagulls engaged in winging their way across the upper left-hand corner; and a stretch of stormy waves bestridden by a fishing-smack in full career before the brisk breeze occupying the larger part of its broad face in very delicate and exquisite outline. When Winifred Massinger saw it carelessly stuck aside among a heap of

others on Mrs. Bouverie Barton's occasional table in South Audley Street, she took it up with a start and examined it closely. "Mr. Warren Relf!" she cried, in a tone of some surprise. "Then you know him, Mrs. Barton? I didn't remember he was one of your circle. But there, of course you know everybody.—What a sweet little etching!"

"What? Mr. Warren Relf?—Oh yes, I know him. Not, I'm afraid, a very successful artist, as yet; but they say he has merit—in his own way, merit. And he's rising now; a coming man, I'm told, in his special line. Mr. Mitchison thinks his delicacy of touch and purity of colour are something really quite remarkable. I'm going to see these new pictures of his on Saturday, if I can sandwich him in edgeways between the Society for the Higher Education of Women and the Richter concert or tea at the MacKinnons'. I've only five engagements for Saturday. Quite an empty day.—Have you got a card for the private view yourself, dear?"

"No," Winifred answered with a slight blush. "My husband knew Mr. Relf quite

intimately once upon a time ; but the fact is, somehow, since our marriage, a coolness seems to have sprung up between them—I don't know why ; perhaps from the ordinary human perversity. At any rate, Hugh won't even so much as see him now. Mr. Relf's been yachting down our way the last two or three summers, and Hugh positively wouldn't let me ask him in to have a cup of afternoon tea with us in the garden at Whitestrand.—But I should like to see his new pictures immensely.—I used to think his pieces awfully funny, I remember, and quite meaningless, in the old days, down in dear old Suffolk ; but Mr. Hatherley tells me that was only my unregenerate nature, and that they're really beautiful—a great deal too good for me. He considers Mr. Relf a very great painter, and has wonderful hopes about his artistic future. I wish I could find out what I thought of them nowadays, after my taste's been educated and turned topsy-turvy by contact with so much æsthetic society.”

“ Well, then, would you like to go with us, dear ? ” Mrs. Bouverie Barton asked kindly.

Winifred turned over the card with a wist-

ful look. "It says, 'Mr. and Mrs. Bouverie Barton *and friends*,'" she repeated with emphasis. "So of course you can take whoever you like with you, can't you, Mrs. Barton?—Saturday the 3rd, from 2.30 to 6 P.M.—I think I might.—I'll risk it anyhow.—That'd suit me admirably. My appointment with Sir Anthony's for two precisely."

"Your appointment with Sir Anthony?" Mrs. Barton echoed in a grieved undertone.

Winifred coughed—such a nasty dry little hacking cough. "Why, yes, Sir Anthony Wraxall," she answered, checking herself with some difficulty from a brief paroxysm of her usual trouble. "I've come up this week, in fact, on purpose to consult him. Hugh made me come, my lungs have been so awfully odd lately. I've seen Sir Anthony twice already; and he's punched me and pummelled me and pulled me about till there's not much left of me whole anywhere; so on Saturday he means by summary process to get rid of the rest of me altogether.—Would you mind calling for me at Sir Anthony's at three sharp? He gives me an hour, a whole hour; an unusual concession

for a man whose time's money—worth a golden guinea every three minutes.”

“My dear,” Mrs. Bouverie Barton put in tenderly—everybody knows Mrs. Bouverie Barton, the most charming and sympathetic hostess in literary London—“you hardly seem fit to go running about town sight-seeing at present.—Does Mr. Massinger seriously realize how extremely weak and ill you are?—It scarcely seems to me you ought to be troubling your poor little head about private views or anything of the sort with a cough like that upon you.”

“Oh, it isn't much, I assure you, dear Mrs. Barton,” Winifred answered with a quiet sigh, the tears coming up into her eyes as she spoke at the touch of sympathy. “Hugh doesn't think it's at all serious. I've been a good deal troubled and worried of late, that's all.—Sir Anthony'll set me all right soon.—You see, I've had a great deal of trouble.” The tears stood brimming her poor dim eyes. Wife and mother as she had been already, she was still young, very, very young. Her face looked pale and sadly pathetic.

Mrs. Bouverie Barton raised the small

white hand gently in her own. It was thin and delicate, with long and slender consumptive fingers. Mrs. Barton's mouth grew graver for a moment. That poor child had suffered much, she thought to herself, and she had probably much to suffer in future. How much, indeed, it was not in Winifred's cramped little nature to confide to any one.

At 128, Bletchingley Road, the ancestral home of all the Relfs—for one generation—a tiny eight-roomed London house in a side-street of intense South Kensington—all was bustle and flutter and feverish excitement. Edie Relf to-day was absolutely in her element. It was her joy in life, indeed, to compass the Impossible. And the Impossible now stared her frankly in the face in the concrete shape of a geometrical absurdity. She had undertaken to make the less contain the greater, all the axioms of Euclid to the contrary notwithstanding. What are space and time to a clever woman? Of no more importance in her scheme of things than to Emmanuel Kant or to Shadworth Hodgson. The Relfs had issued no fewer than three

hundred and twenty separate invitation cards, each with that extensible india-rubber clause, "and friends," so capable of indefinite and incalculable expansion. Now, the little front drawing-room at Bletchingley Road could just be induced, when the furniture was abolished by Act of Parliament, and the piano removed upstairs to the back bedroom, to accommodate at a pinch some thirty-five persons, mostly chairless. Three hundred and twenty invited guests, plus an indefinite expansion under the casual category of desultory friends, cannot be reduced by any known process of arithmetic or mensuration into the limits of a space barely sufficient to supply standing-room for thirty-five. But that was just where Edie Relf's organizing genius knew itself in the presence of an emergency worthy of its steel. When an insoluble difficulty dawned serene upon her puzzled view, Edie Relf's spirits rose at once, Antæus-like, to the occasion, and soared beyond the narrow and hampering limitations of mundane geometry. "My dear Edie," Mrs. Relf cried in a voice of despair, "we can never, never, never pack them in anyhow."

"Herrings in a box would find themselves comparatively roomy and comfortable," Warren murmured, with a glance of black despondency round the four scanty walls of the tiny drawing-room. "How on earth could you ever think of asking so many?"

"Nonsense, my dears!" Edie answered with a confident smile that presaged victory. "Leave that to me. It's my proper business. I see it all. The commanding officer should never be hampered by futile predictions of defeat and dishonour. Of course they won't come, the greater part of them. They never do rush, I regret to say, to inspect your immortal works, Warren. But still we must arrange, for all that, as if we expected the whole united British people—in case of a rush, don't you know, mother. Some day, I feel certain the rush will arrive; a Duke will invest his spare cash in 'Off the Nore: Morning,' and hang it up visibly to all beholders on the silver-gilt walls of his own dining-room. The picture-buying classes, with rolls of money jingling and clinking in their trousers' pockets, will see and admire that magnificent *chef-d'œuvre*—or at least, if they

don't know how to admire, will determine to back a Duke's judgment—and will hurry down in their millions, with blank cheque-books protruding from their flaps, to crowd the studio and buy up the lot at a valuation. I confess even I should have some difficulty in seating and providing tea for the millions. But this lot's easy—a mere bagatelle. Let me see. We've only sent out cards, I think, for a poor trifle of three hundred and twenty."

"No," Warren corrected very gravely. "Three hundred and twenty cards, you mean, for six hundred and forty wives and husbands."

"Some of them are bachelors, my dear," Edie answered with a sagacious nod; "and some old maids, who never by any chance buy anything. As far as art's concerned, the old maid may be regarded as a mere cipher. But, for argument's sake, since you want to argufy, like the parson in the Black Country, we'll say six hundred. Now, what's six hundred human beings in a house like this—a mansion—a palace—a perfect Vatican—distributed over nearly four hours, and equally diffused throughout the entire establishment?"

Of course, my dear, you at once apply the doctrine of averages. That's scientific. Each party stops not longer than an hour at the very outside. You never have two hundred in the place at once. And what's two hundred? A mere trifle! I declare it affords no scope at all for a girl's ingenuity. Like our respected ancestor, Warren Hastings, I stand aghast at my own moderation.—I really wish, mother, now I come to think of it, we'd sent out invitations for a thousand."

"Six hundred's quite enough for me, I'm sure," Warren replied, glancing round the room once more in palpable doubt. "How do you mean to arrange for them, Edie?"

"Oh, easy enough. Nothing could be simpler. I'll tell you how. First of all, you throw open the folding-doors—or rather, to save the room at the sides, you lift them bodily off their hinges, and stick them out of the dining-room window into the back garden."

"They won't go through," Warren objected, measuring with his eye.

"Rubbish, my dear! Won't go through, indeed! You men have no imagination and

no invention. You manufacture difficulties out of pure obstructiveness. If they won't go through whole, why, just take out the panels and unglue the woodwork, that's all.—Very well, then ; that throws the drawing-room and dining-room into one good big reception-room, from which of course we remove all the furniture. Next, we range the chairs in a long row round the sides for the old ladies—the old ladies are very important ; keep 'em down-stairs, or else they'll prevent their husbands from buying—and let the men and the able-bodied girls stand up and group themselves in picturesque clusters here and there about the vacant centre. What could be easier, simpler, or more effective ? A room treated so furnishes itself automatically with human properties. With tact and care, we could easily squeeze in some seventy or eighty.”

“We could,” Warren answered, after a mental calculation of square area.—“But how about the pictures ?”

“Hear him, mother ! Oh, but men are helpless ! Where should the pictures be but up in the studio, stupid ! We wouldn't take

all the people up to see them at once, of course. You and I would go around, looking very affable, with a professional smile—so, you know—perpetually playing about the corners of our mouths, and carry off the men with the most purchasing faces in constant relays up to admire the immortal masterpieces. Meanwhile, mother and Mr. Hatherley, down below here, would do the polite to the old ladies and undertake the deportment business. Or perhaps Mr. Hatherley'd better be stationed on guard upstairs, to fire off some of his gushing critical remarks from time to time about the aërial perspective and the middle distances. Mr. Hatherley always knows just what to say to weigh down the balance for a hesitating purchaser."

"Edie," Warren cried, flinging himself down with a disgusted face upon the dining-room sofa, "I hate all this horrid advertising and touting, for all the world as if one were the catchpenny proprietor of a patent medicine, instead of an honest hard-working British artist!"

"I know you do, my dear boy," Edie answered imperturbably; "and that's all the

more reason why those who have the charge of you should undertake to push you and tout for you against your will, till they positively make you achieve the success you yourself will never have the meanness to try for.—But, thank goodness, *I* don't mind puffing. I'm intriguer enough myself for the whole family. If it hadn't been for my egging you on, and pestering you and bullying you and keeping you up to it, we should never have got up this private view of your things at all.—And now, having started and arranged the entire show, I mean to work it my own way without interference. I'm the boss who runs this concern, I can tell you, Warren. Decidedly, Mr. Hatherley shall stop upstairs, with his hair down his back, and deliver wild panegyrics in an ecstatic voice on the aërial perspective and the middle distances.—I shall nudge him when a probable purchaser comes in, to make him turn on the aërial perspective.—I only wish with all my heart we had dear old Elsie over here to help us.”

“But the tea, Edie? How about the tea, dear?” Mrs. Relf interposed with a doubtful countenance.

“And you too, Brutus!” her daughter cried, looking down on her with a despondent shake of the head, which implied a profound and melancholy shock of disappointment. “I thought, mother, I’d brought you up better than that!—The tea, my beloved, will be duly laid out in your own bedroom, which I mean to transform, for this occasion only, with entirely new scenery, decorations, and properties throughout, into a gorgeously furnished oriental lounge and enchanted coffee divan. There, Martha, attired as a Circassian slave—or at least in her best bib and tucker—shall serve out ices, sherbet, and spiced dainties every one from silken Samarcand to cedared Lebanon. The door into my own bedroom will also be open, and in that spacious apartment we shall have a sort of grand supplementary tea and refreshment room, where the Jacksons’ parlour-maid, borrowed for the occasion, as Circassian number two, and becomingly endued in a Liberty apron and a small red cap (price ninepence), shall dispense claret-cup, sponge-cake, and Hamburg grapes to the deserving persons who have earned their restoratives by

the encouragement of art through a judicious purchase. The thing's as easy as ABC. I've not the least doubt it'll run me off my legs. I shall perish in the attempt—but I shall die victorious."

"In your own bedroom, dear!" Mrs. Relf cried aghast. "You'll have the tea in your own bedroom! But where on earth shall we sleep, Edie?"

Edie looked down at her once more with a solemn glance of high disdain. "Sleep!" she cried. "Did you say *sleep*, mother? The craven wretch who dreams of sleeping at such a crisis is unworthy of being Warren Relf's progenitor.—Or ought it to be progenitrix in the feminine, I wonder?—We shall sleep, if at all, my dear (which I greatly doubt), on the floor in the box-room, already occupied by the iron legs of the three best bedsteads.—But don't be afraid. Leave it all to me, darling. Trust your daughter; and your daughter, as usual, will pull you through. If there's anything on earth I love, it's a jolly good muddle."

And jolly as the muddle undoubtedly was, Edie Relf did pull them through in the end

with triumphant strategy. Saturday the 3rd was a brilliant success. Bletchingley Road, that mere suburban byway, had never before in its checkered career beheld so many real live carriages together. The six hundred, or at least a very fair proportion of them, boldly they drove and well, down that narrow side street. All the world wondered. The neighbours looked on and admired with vicarious pride. They felt themselves raised in the social scale by their close proximity to so fashionable a gathering. Number 128 itself was a changed character; it hardly knew its own ground-plan. In the drawing-room and dining-room, thrown wide into one, a goodly collection of artists and picture-buyers and that poor residuum the general public, streamed through incessantly in a constant tide on its way to the studio. The tearoom (late Mrs. Relf's bedroom) blazed out resplendent in borrowed plumes—oriental rugs, Japanese fans, and hanging parasols, arranged *à la* Liberty. Rout seats covered with eastern stuffs lined the walls and passages. The studio, in particular, proudly posed as a work of art of truly Whistleresque magnificence.

Talk about tone! The effect was unique. Warren Relf himself, who for three nights previously had "had a bed out" at the lodgings next door, and swallowed down a hasty chop for luncheon at the Cheyne Row Club, had superintended in person the hanging of the wonderful sage-green *crotonne* and the pale maize silk that so admirably threw up the dainty colours of his delicate and fantastic sea-pieces. Elsewhere, Edie alone had reigned supreme. And as two of the clock chimed from Kensington church tower on that eventful afternoon, she murmured aside to her mother, with an enraptured gaze at the scarlet and green *kakemonos* on the wall of the staircase: "My dear, there's not a speck of dust in this house, nor a bone in my body that isn't aching."

When the hired man from the mews behind flung open the drawing-room door in his lordly way and announced in a very loud voice, "Mrs. Bouverie Barton and Mrs. Hugh Massinger," neither Warren nor Edie was in the front room to hear the startling announcement, which would certainly for the moment have taken their breath away. For

communications between the houses of Relf and Massinger had long since ceased. But Warren and Edie were both upstairs. So Winifred and her hostess passed idly in (just shaking hands by the doorway with good old Mrs. Relf, who never by any chance caught anybody's name) and mingled shortly with the mass of the visitors. Winifred was very glad indeed of that, for she wanted to escape observation. Sir Anthony's report had been far from reassuring. She preferred to remain as much in the background as possible that afternoon: all she wished was merely to observe and to listen.

As she stood there mingling with the general crowd and talking to some chance acquaintance of old London days, she happened to overhear two scraps of conversation going on behind her. The first was one that mentioned no names; and yet, by some strange feminine instinct, she was sure it was of herself the speakers were talking.

"Oh yes," one voice said in a low tone, with the intonation that betrays a furtive side-glance; "she's far from strong—in fact, very delicate. He married her for her money

—of course : that's clear. She hadn't much else, poor little thing, except a certain short-lived *beauté du diable*, to recommend her. And she has no go in her; she won't live long. You remember what Galton remarks about heiresses? They're generally the last decadent members, he says, of a moribund stock whose strength is failing. They bear no children, or if any, weaklings : most of them break down with their first infant; and they die at last prematurely of organic feebleness. Why, he just sold himself outright for the poor girl's property; that's the plain English of it; and now, I hear, with his extravagant habits, he's got himself after all into monetary difficulties."

"Agricultural depression?" the second voice inquired—an older man's and louder.

"Worse than that, I fear; agricultural depression and an encroaching sea. Besides which, he spends too freely.—But excuse me, Dr. Moutrie," in a very low tone : "I'm afraid the lady's rather near us."

Winifred strained her ears to the utmost to hear the rest; but the voices had sunk too low now to catch a sound, and the young

man with whom she was supposed to be talking had evidently got tired of the very perfunctory Yeses and Noes she was dealing out to him right and left at irregular intervals with charming irrelevance. She roused herself, and endeavoured spasmodically to regain the lost thread of her proper conversation. But even as she did so, another voice, far more distinct, from a lady in front, caught her attention with the name "Miss Challoner." Winifred pricked up her ears incontinently. Could it be of her Elsie that those two were talking? Challoner's not such a *very* uncommon name, to be sure! And yet—and yet, there are not so many Miss Challoners, either, distributed up and down the surface of Europe, as to make the coincidence particularly improbable. Challoners are not so plentiful as blackberries. It might every bit as well be Elsie as any other Miss Challoner unattached. Winifred strained her ears once more to catch their talk with quickened interest.

"Oh yes," the second lady addressed made answer cheerfully; "she was very well when we last saw her in April at San Remo. We

had the next villa to the Relfs on the hillside, you know. But Miss Challoner doesn't come to England now; she was going as usual to St. Martin Lantosque to spend the summer, when we left the Riviera. She always goes there as soon as the San Remo season's over."

"How did the Relfs first come to pick her up?" the other speaker asked curiously.

"Oh, I fancy it was Mr. Warren Relf himself who made her acquaintance somewhere unearthly down in Suffolk, where she used to be a governess. He's always there, I believe, lying on a mudbank, yachting and sketching."

Winifred could restrain her curiosity no longer. "I beg your pardon," she said, leaning forward eagerly, "but I think you mentioned a certain Miss Challoner. May I ask, does it happen by any chance to be Elsie Challoner, who was once at Girton? Because, if so, she was a governess of mine, and I haven't heard of her for a long time past. Governesses drop out of one's world so fast. I should be glad to know where she's living at present."

The lady nodded. "Her name's Elsie," she said with a quiet inclination, "and she was certainly a Girton girl; but I hardly think she can be the same you mention. I should imagine, indeed, she's a good deal too young a girl to have been your governess."

It was innocently said, but Winifred's face was one vivid flush of mingled shame and humiliation. Talk about *beauté du diable* indeed; she never knew before she had grown so very plain and ancient. "I'm not quite so old as I look, perhaps," she answered hastily. "I've had a great deal to break me down. But I'm glad to learn where Elsie is, anyhow. You said she was living at San Remo, I fancy?"

"At San Remo. Yes. She spends her winters there. For the summers, she always goes up to St. Martin."

"Thank you," Winifred answered with a throbbing heart. "I'm glad to have found out at last what's become of her.—Mrs. Barton, if you can tear yourself away from Dr. and Mrs. Tyacke, who are always so alluring, suppose we go upstairs now and look at the pictures."

In the studio, Warren Relf recognized her at once, and with much trepidation came up to speak to her. It would all be out now, he greatly feared; and Hugh would learn at last that Elsie was living. For Winifred's own sake—she looked so pale and ill—he would fain have kept the secret to himself a few months longer.

Winifred held out her hand frankly. She liked Warren; she had always liked him; and besides, Hugh had forbidden her to see him. Her lips trembled, but she was bold, and spoke. "Mr. Relf," she said with quiet earnestness, "I'm so glad to meet you here to-day again—glad on more than one account. You go to San Remo often, I believe. Can you tell me if Elsie Challoner is living there?"

Warren Relf looked back at her in undisguised astonishment. "She is," he answered. "Did my sister tell you so?"

"No," Winifred replied with bitter truthfulness. "I found it out." And with that one short incisive sentence, she moved on coldly, as if she would fain look at the pictures.

“Does—does Massinger know it?” Warren asked all aghast, taken aback by surprise, and unwittingly trampling on her tenderest feelings.

Winifred turned round upon him with an angry flash. This was more than she could bear. The tears were struggling hard to rise to her eyes; she kept them back with a supreme effort. “How should I know, pray?” she answered fiercely, but very low. “Does he make me the confidante of all his loves, do you suppose, Mr. Relf?—He said she was in Australia.—He told me a lie.—Everybody’s combined and caballed to deceive me.—How should I know whether he knows or not? I know nothing. But one thing I know: from my mouth at least he shall never, never, never hear it.”

She turned away, stern and hard as iron. Hugh had deceived her; Elsie had deceived her. The two souls she had loved the best on earth! From that moment forward, the joy of her life, whatever had been left of it, was all gone from her. She went forth from the room a crushed creature.

How varied in light and shade the world

is! While Winifred was driving gloomily back to her own lodgings—solitary and heart-broken, in Mrs. Bouverie Barton's comfortable carriage—revolving in her own wounded soul this incredible conspiracy of Hugh's and Elsie's—Edie Relf and her mother and brother were joyfully discussing their great triumph in the now dismantled and empty front drawing-room at 128, Bletchingley Road, South Kensington.

“Have you totted up the total of the sales, Warren?” Edie Relf inquired with a bright light in her eye and a smile on her lips; for the private view—her own inception—had been more than successful from its very beginning.

Warren jotted down a series of figures on the back of an envelope and counted them up mentally with profound trepidation. “Mother,” he cried, clasping her hand with a convulsive clutch in his, “I’m afraid to tell you; it’s so positively grand. It seems really too much.—If this goes on, you need never take any pupils again.—Edie, we owe it all to you.—It can’t be right, yet it comes out square. I’ve reckoned up twice and

got each time the same total—four hundred and fifty !”

“I thought so,” Edie answered with a happy little laugh of complete triumph. “I hit upon such a capital dodge, Warren. I never told you beforehand what I was going to do, for I knew if I did, you’d never allow me to put it into execution ; but I wrote the name and price of each picture in big letters and plain figures on the back of the frame. Then, whenever I took up a person with a good, coinly, solvent expression of countenance, and a picture-buying crease about the corners of the mouth, to inspect the studio, I waited for them casually to ask the name of any special piece they particularly admired. ‘Let me see,’ said I. ‘What does Warren call that? I think it’s on the back here.’ So I turned round the frame, and there they’d see it, as large as life : ‘By Stormy Seas—Ten Pounds ;’ or, ‘The Haunt of the Sea-Swallows—Thirty Guineas.’ That always fetched them, my dear. They couldn’t resist it. It’s a ticklish thing to inquire about prices. People don’t like to ask, for fear they should offend you, or the figure should

happen to be too stiff for their purses; and it makes them feel small to inquire the price and find it's ten times as much as they expected. But when they see the amount written down in black and white before their own eyes, at our astonishingly low cash quotations, what on earth can they do, being human, but buy them?—Warren, you may give me a kiss, if you like. I'll tell you what I've done: I've made your fortune."

Warren kissed her affectionately on the forehead, half abashed. "You're a bad girl, Edie," he said good-humouredly; "and if I'd only known it, I'd certainly have taken a great big cake of best ink-eraser and rubbed your plain figures all carefully out again.—But I don't care a pin in the end, after all, if I can make this dear mother and you comfortable."

"And marry Elsie," Edie put in mischievously.

Warren gave a quiet sigh of regret. "And marry Elsie," he added low. "But Elsie will never marry me."

"You goose!" said Edie, and laughed at

him to his face. She knew women better than he did.

"That dear Mr. Hatherley managed quite half," she went on after a pause. "If you'd only heard him discussing textures, or listened to the high-flown nonsense he talked about 'delicate touch,' and 'crystalline purity,' and 'poetical undertones,' and 'keen insight into the profoundest recesses of nature,' you'd have blushed to learn what a great painter you are, Warren. Why, he made out that a wave to your artistic eyes shone like opal and beryl to the ignoble vulgar. He remarked that liquid sapphires simply strewed your summer seas, and mud in your hands became more gorgeous than markle to the common understanding. The dear good fellow! That's what I call something like a friend for you. Your artistic eye, indeed! I could just have thrown my arms around his neck and kissed him!"

"Eddie!" her mother exclaimed reprovingly. The last generation deprecates such open expression of feminine approbation.

"I could, mother," Eddie answered with a bounce, unabashed. "And what's more, I

should have awfully liked to do it. I should love to kiss him ; and I don't care twopence who hears me say so.—Goodness gracious, I do hope that isn't Mr. Hatherley out on the staircase there ! ”

But it was only Martha bringing back from the attics the strictly necessary in the way of furniture for the meal that was to serve them in lieu of dinner.

And all this while, poor lonely Winifred was rocking herself wildly backward and forward in Mrs. Bouverie Barton's comfortable carriage, and muttering to herself in a mad fever of despair : “ I could have believed it of Hugh ; but of Elsie, of Elsie—never, never ! ”

Elsie's ring gleamed bright on her finger—the ring, as she thought, that Elsie had sent her ; the ring that Hugh had really enclosed in the forged letter. Hateful, treacherous, cruel souvenir ! At Hyde Park Corner, where the crowd of carriages and riders was thickest, she tore it off and flung it with mad energy into the midst of the roadway. The horses might trample it under

foot and destroy it. Elsie, too—Elsie—Elsie was a traitor! She flung it from her like some poisonous thing; and then she sank back exhausted on the cushions.

END OF VOL. II.